

Walking the Wire

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Walking the Wire

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Summary

What Megatron and Ratchet are to each other is a matter up for debate, one that gets a little tangled when the Lost Light stumbles into an unexpected complication.

Notes

So this was a short sequel to Hot to Trot that turned into a long sequel to Hot to Trot that's all about Feelings and Relationships and Learning to Trust. All things Megatron and Ratchet aren't so very good at. So. Enjoy...?

Chapter 1

It wasn't a relationship. Such a title implied affection, permanency, a future.

That was not what he and Megatron had. Ratchet didn't know what to call it, but relationship didn't fit the bill.

Hot mess now, that was pretty accurate.

They fought as much as they fragged. They woke up in one another's berth more often than not. They kept it a secret, not because they were ashamed, but because the crew was a bunch of gossipy busybodies and neither of them wanted to hear the commentary.

But it wasn't a *relationship*. It was just something that sort of happened and kept happening, because Ratchet suddenly had no self-control and Megatron had become someone utterly irresistible.

Ratchet tried not to think about it too hard. Because if he did, he'd go mad. This quest was already strange and unusual enough. What was one more oddity to add to the sheer what-the-fraggery Rodimus tended to attract?

For once, Ratchet decided to just go with the flow and let the dominoes lay where they toppled. Or however the phrase went.

Three months after their illicit and torrid affair thanks to both circumstance and the fact they couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other, the Lost Light docked at an interplanetary space station called the Quartex. It welcomed all species, even Cybertronians. It was rare to find such a place, given the Cybertronian reputation, so the crew spilled into the station, eager to be free of the confines of their ship and each other.

Ratchet, ever suspicious now of places friendly to Cybertron, dared venture into the space port. The rest of the crew weren't the only ones who needed some distance. Maybe if he wasn't caught in the confined space of the ship, sanity would return.

Megatron hadn't asked to come with him. Ratchet hadn't offered. Instead, Megatron remained aboard the Lost Light with Ultra Magnus. Apparently they were going to go over some kind of report that was of great importance. Or wasn't. Sometimes, Magnus couldn't accurately measure priorities.

There was a pretty vast entertainment center on the Quartex. Most of the Lost Light's crew headed there. Ratchet made it a point to go in the opposite direction, which happened to be a shopping district. There wasn't anything he needed, but it never hurt to window shop. He didn't even have to use his holoavatar here.

The best part about it was that most of the crew was so broke, they had no interest in shopping because they had no creds. Not that Ratchet was overflowing in funds himself, but he'd had some savings stashed in an off-planet bank, and they'd accrued a fair bit of interest during the course of the war. Miraculously, they hadn't been stolen or seized by some foreign entity convinced the Cybertronians needed to literally pay for their crimes.

Ratchet wondered what Drift would say, if he knew Ratchet had actually left the ship instead of

spending the stopover holed up in the medbay, doing inventory for the nth time. He'd probably think it was due to his influence, and that it was a sign from the stars Ratchet was finally learning to let go.

Ratchet snorted. He never thought he'd see the day he'd miss Drift and his overly optimistic, desperate attempt to change. What would Drift have said about Ratchet's new... relationship with Megatron, for lack of a better word. He'd probably be appalled.

Drift never talked much about his past, at least not in detail. Ratchet had inferred a lot, mostly from scouts and intel during the war. He knew Deadlock used to be close to Megatron and pretty high up in the command chain before he vanished and reappeared as Drift. The circumstances surrounding Drift's defection were also vague.

Sometimes, Ratchet wondered about his own state of mind, that he'd fallen into berth with Megatron not once, not twice, but so many times he'd lost track at this point. It was a constant thing now. Multiple times a week. Not only at night, either, given that their schedules rarely matched.

It would be easy if it was just interfacing. If it was just pleasure, and they said their goodbyes and never interacted outside the meeting of mouths and hands and spikes and valves.

Somehow, it wasn't always about the berth. Sometimes, Ratchet found himself sharing a meal – Ratchet with his midgrade and Megatron with his allotment of fool's energon. They sat across the table from each other, reading their own datapads, and it was a silence so companionable it scared the slag out of Ratchet.

Later, of course, it became interfacing. But it was those quiet moments that were the most frightening. It meant things Ratchet wasn't ready to admit.

Ratchet sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face. He'd ventured into Quartex in an attempt to keep his mind from Megatron. Instead, he'd found himself contemplating the state of their affairs.

He purposely paid better attention to the shops instead. He let himself be distracted by the signs shouting sales and bigger, better items. The glitz and glamor was not to his taste, but he imagined Rodimus would be quite at home here. Ratchet ignored the weapons depot, and was briefly tempted by a sweets shop displaying flavored rust sticks in the window.

Ratchet didn't need candy to gum up his internals. He kept going.

He passed another shop, where streams of colors hung in the window, and it seized his attention at once. Ratchet paused to peer at the display, his engine revving at the lengths of rope hanging down like a curtain inside the window. They were a variety of colors, thickness, materials. Some looked as flimsy as silken thread; others as strong as chains.

One rope in particular, braided and thick, a bright and brilliant scarlet, called to Ratchet more than the others. He remembered how cutely Megatron had obeyed him. He remembered thinking how gorgeous Megatron would be wrapped in ropes, driven mad with pleasure. He'd imagined a red rope then.

Just like this one.

Ratchet hesitated. These looked as though they might be perfect. Thick, but not too thick. Strong enough to hold up to minor tugging and accidental straining, but not so much they weren't breakable if enough force was applied. The point wouldn't be to keep Megatron from escaping, after all, but to

give him the illusion of being caught.

A wave of heat trickled through Ratchet's lines, along with a flash of dirty images. He imagined those ropes wrapped around Megatron, thin little knots framing his valve, wrapped around his spike. Megatron would tremble for him, vent loudly, he'd growl out of embarrassment and demand Ratchet tend to him. But he'd moan when Ratchet touched him, and he'd relent.

Ratchet gnawed on his bottom lip.

The shop was built to accommodate those of equal size to the standard Cybertronian. Its door proudly claimed that it accepted all types of currency, and even offered a fair exchange rate if necessary. Almost as though it were taunting him with how easy it would be to purchase what he wanted.

Ratchet cycled a ventilation and pushed through the door, a cheerful little chime announcing his arrival. He'd already made up his mind, no reason to pretend otherwise. He wanted to see those ropes wrapped around Megatron.

He sincerely hoped Megatron would let him.

~

They didn't make plans. They didn't set dates. They arranged for nothing ahead of time. That would feel too much like a relationship, something important, something worthy of investment.

And yet, somehow, they still managed to meet on a regular basis. They came up with a schedule and stuck to it without communicating said schedule. It was a routine, and it was three months into it before Ratchet even realized they'd formed one.

If the pattern held true, Megatron would be arriving at Ratchet's hab this evening. It would be after his second shift, and he'd have the next two shifts free. Ratchet would be on call, and if the crew knew what was good for them, nothing would happen to cause his emergency communicator to beep shrilly at him.

If he had to pull out of Megatron again because someone was playing tag grenade and missed, Ratchet truly would follow through with his threat to re-format the offender into a dishwasher. Preferably for use in Swerve's bar.

Ratchet hadn't been amused the first time. He'd been downright irritated the second time. There would not be a third.

Ratchet swept his small table clear and emptied the bag of purchases on top of it. Three coils of rope tumbled out, as did a bottle of lubricant, a pair of magna-cuffs, and a thin flog he hadn't been able to resist. He didn't intend to suggest they try all of this tonight as he suspected the ropes would be surprise enough. But it never hurt to add more to his collection.

Ratchet chuckled. Wouldn't Megatron be shocked to learn Ratchet even had a collection? Or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe the Decepticons were a lot kinkier than Ratchet knew.

He gathered the cuffs and the flog and tucked both into the storage crate under his berth. He left out the rope and the lube. One was fairly innocuous, the other... well. Maybe for once Megatron could be the one feeling off-balance. Somehow, Ratchet felt like he struggled for solid ground, while Megatron smirked at him, completely at ease and confident and in control.

The outer door chimed right on schedule. Not that they had one, but somehow, Megatron still showed up at the same time on the same day, and every time, Ratchet was here waiting for him. He left the rope and lubricant in plain sight on the table and answered the door, unsurprised to find Megatron on the other side of it, looking far too large, quite shiny, and more delectable than a former warlord responsible for millions of deaths had any right to be.

“You look pleased with yourself,” Megatron commented, his optics drawing into narrow slits. “Should I be worried?”

Ratchet snorted. “That’s up to you. No one said you have to come inside.” He stepped away, leaving the option available.

Behind him, the door slid shut and locked, with Megatron on the proper side of it. “I didn’t say I changed my mind.”

That would imply a decision had been made in the first place. Ratchet wasn’t sure when they decided on anything. It all seemed to be based on happenstance and purposeful deception from both of them. It remained to be seen who they were trying to fool more.

“Good. Because my face looks exactly the way it’s supposed to,” Ratchet said.

He moved past the table as though there was nothing to be noticed about it. He headed straight for his cabinet, rooting around in it for something to offer Megatron that the former warlord was allowed to consume.

Coolant perhaps. Maybe a couple of those rust sticks he’d been unable to resist as he passed the sweets shop on his way back to the Lost Light.

His sensors tracked Megatron’s footsteps. One, two, three into the room. Then pause. Hesitate. Linger.

Ratchet glanced over his shoulder. Megatron stood by the table, staring at the items on top of it. His expression was unreadable. Ratchet couldn’t tell if it was apprehension in the set of his armor, or intrigue.

“See something you like?” Ratchet asked, feigning innocence.

Coolant it was. He pulled it free of the cabinet and returned to the table, setting it down beside the bottle of lubricant.

“Is this a test?” Megatron asked, and that it didn’t come out as a growl or a demand was surprising. Especially when Megatron’s optics cycled a bit wider, his fans audibly spinning faster.

“No. An invitation.” Ratchet rested his hand on the rope and hooked a finger in one of the loops. He lifted so that it dangled between them. “Do you trust me?”

Megatron met his optics. “Trust,” he echoed. “I’m not sure what the correct answer to that question

is.”

“That’s because there isn’t one. You either trust me or you don’t.” Ratchet set the rope to swaying, pleased when Megatron’s optics tracked the motion. And when his ventilations audibly hitched. “For example, I’d like to tie you up and see how many overloads I can get out of you in a single night. What do you think about that?”

Megatron visibly worked his intake. “I think that it is an interesting idea.” He caught the rope on an upswing and tugged it from Ratchet’s fingers. He turned it over in his hands, examining the material. “I could break this with minimal effort.”

“That’s the point.” Ratchet braced his hands on the table and leaned forward, looking up at Megatron. “For something like this, it’s better to start small. Especially considering who we are. So. Do you trust me?”

An answer was not immediately forthcoming. Megatron’s lips pressed together as he fingered the rope, pinching it, stretching it, testing it. His vents increased, betraying his emotions, though if they were anxiety or excitement, Ratchet couldn’t tell. Megatron was a master at keeping his field in check.

“Yes,” Megatron said at length, and he held the rope out to Ratchet. “I trust you.”

Ratchet was floored. He didn’t expect the frank statement. He expected Megatron to tease, to play more word games. He was not expecting to take the rope without thinking twice, as Megatron coughed a vent and looked away, his face taking on heat.

“When do you want to start?” Megatron asked.

Ratchet flicked his glossa over his lips. “Now,” he said as he struggled to control his vents. He didn’t know it would be this easy, and his processor kept conjuring up images that revved his engine. “But before I even start, what do you want to use as a safe word?”

Megatron blinked. His orbital ridges drew down. “Safe word?”

The outright cluelessness in his tone succeeded in surprising Ratchet for the second time that evening. Megatron had been so bold in their previous encounters, so knowledgeable. He’d not hesitated to offer his aft, to participate in other lewd acts the likes of which gave Ratchet plenty of self-servicing material for the weeks that followed. He was a walking interface dream.

But he looked at the rope like it was a toxic-viper that might bite him. He repeated ‘safe word’ like it was an unfamiliar pair of glyphs, tasting them for later memorization.

“While I don’t anticipate this turning into some hard play, it’s still important to set boundaries,” Ratchet started to explain while he watched Megatron carefully, tracking every reaction. “Like, for example, what your hard stops are and what word you’d like to use to make me stop, when stop either isn’t an option or you want to make a point.”

Megatron frowned. “We shouldn’t overcomplicate it. I don’t need such a thing.”

Ratchet narrowed his optics, his hands tightening around the rope. “Yes, you do. Anyone who engages in this sort of play does. I won’t continue without it.”

Megatron folded his arms over his chassis, which had the effect of making him seem larger and more intimidating. To lesser bots anyway. Ratchet hadn't been intimidated by Megatron in a long, long time, and he wasn't about to start now.

It was exceedingly difficult to be intimidated by a mech whose face you'd rode on more than one occasion.

"I can take anything you think you can do to me," Megatron declared, and there was something in the tightness of his tone that bordered on... defensive? Bluster?

Ratchet caught himself from snapping out a sarcastic retort, because he was more than a little appalled. There were a lot of implications in that statement, and he wasn't sure he was ready to dig into it. What that said about Megatron's past sexual history, or maybe the culture of interfacing among the Decepticons, Ratchet didn't want to speculate.

"It's not about 'taking it'," Ratchet said, slow and careful, trying not to sound condescending and wondering if he succeeded or not, given the way Megatron stared at him. "This isn't me testing you to see how much you can endure just for the Pit of it, Megatron. It's not torture."

Megatron rolled his optics. "I didn't say it was." He huffed a ventilation. "I just don't think there's any need for something as pointless as a safe word."

"Pointless," Ratchet echoed. He worked his jaw, cycling several ventilations so he could swallow both irritation and anger, neither of which were helpful in this situation. "There is nothing pointless about establishing trust between two mechs engaged in a type of play that is built upon a foundation of trust. It is not weakness to ensure that we both enjoy ourselves and respect one another's boundaries. I don't know what--"

"--Alright fine." Megatron lifted his hands, cutting Ratchet off mid-sentence. "I get your point. Spare me the tirade." He muttered something subvocally that probably anyone else but a medic wouldn't have caught.

He was not like Optimus' pontificating thank you very much.

Ratchet huffed. "I'm not going to do this if you're not interested in being responsible. Don't just say you understand, and then ignore the safe word if you need it."

"I highly doubt a little rope and some pleasure is going to alarm me enough to call an end, but I will agree to your safety measures." Megatron gave Ratchet a long, flat look. "Will that satisfy you enough that we can continue?"

His patronizing tone was almost enough to make Ratchet toss the rope back onto the table and show Megatron to the door.

Almost.

"Turpentine," Ratchet said.

Megatron blinked, and for a moment, looked so flummoxed Ratchet almost laughed aloud. But it wiped away the condescension in his optics, and that was the point. "What?"

"Your safe word." Ratchet started uncoiling the rope and measured the length of it with his optics.

Or at least pretended to. He'd already decided what he was going to do with it when he bought it. "Unless you'd prefer something else."

"No. Turpentine will do." Megatron's mouth twisted, and Ratchet wasn't sure if it was supposed to be a grimace or a smile. "How do you want me?"

Ratchet tilted his head toward the berth, a scenario unfurling in his mind, letting heat bloom through his circuits and burn out the lingering irritation. Fortunately, this was the part they were good at, when anger turned to fragging, and hissed arguments turned to moans and demands for more.

Pleasure was the easiest part. It was supposed to be the only part.

"On the berth." Ratchet licked his lips, running his fingers along the length of the cord. "On your back, if you please."

Megatron's lip curled, and there was that disdain again, as if he'd figured Ratchet out from the request, and he was decidedly unimpressed. Also, bored.

"Should I spread my legs?" Megatron sat on the berth edge before hefting himself onto it, scooting across the surface. "Do you want me open and ready? Maybe I should call you 'master' while I'm at it."

Ratchet moved toward the head of the berth, optics flicking over the available surfaces. Those lights should do. Hopefully, the cords would snap before the braces did.

He didn't want to hear Magnus' lecture when he got a copy of the maintenance request.

"You can call me master if it makes you feel more in control or better about it," Ratchet replied in a bland tone, refusing to rise to Megatron's bait. He recognized a defense mechanism when he saw one. "Let me see your wrists. You're okay with me binding them, right?"

Megatron twisted his jaw. His optics flickered. His heels scrubbed the surface of the berth before he offered his hands to Ratchet, like a criminal to his arresting officer.

"I'm not a coward," he said.

Ratchet swallowed a sigh. He wrapped the cord gently around Megatron's wrists as he reconsidered this. There were a lot of misconceptions here. He could spend hours trying to explain the differences to Megatron, fielding patronizing rebuttals and optic rolls the entire time.

Or he could put words to action and show Megatron what this was about. After all, they were practically vanilla here. A little wrist bondage? Come on. Ratchet might as well have served Megatron balloons, candies, and candles on a silver platter.

"Never said you were." Ratchet tugged Megatron's arms over his head and looped the cord around the light braces. He aimed for brutal honesty, hoping it would get through that wall of defensive aggression. "Been with my share of soldiers though. Everyone's got a trigger. No shame in that."

The curl to Megatron's lip flattened. He gave a testing tug to the restraints, and the light brace creaked, but held. If he didn't struggle, it would stay intact.

"This is hardly distressful," he said.

Ratchet ground his denta. “Then maybe not everyone is a big, brave emperor of destruction with a penchant for slaughtering entire planets.” He dragged his hands down the length of Megatron’s arms, slow and steady, better a caress. “To put it in perspective.”

“I think you’re confusing me for Starscream.” Megatron snorted and his gaze cut away. Out of shame? Too early to tell. “He’s the self-proclaimed emperor.”

“Skipped right over the slaughtering planets part I see,” Ratchet said dryly.

His hands drifted down to Megatron’s shoulders, fingers slipping into the joints, tasting the cables beneath. “Dare I ask if you’re comfortable or will you just accuse me of coddling you again?”

Megatron snorted.

Fine then. If he wanted to be uncomfortable, Ratchet would let him. He’d understand soon enough.

Ratchet didn’t much like the way Megatron held himself. Too taut, too contained, his field unreadable, and his armor slicked tight to his frame. But he had yet to say ‘no’ or ‘stop’ or ‘turpentine’. He hadn’t tried to escape; he hadn’t offered a protest of any kind.

Slagging Decepticon bravado.

Ratchet climbed onto the berth and straddled Megatron’s upper thighs. Heat puffed up in thin trails from the narrow gaps in Megatron’s armor. He was shaking, however minutely, and Ratchet hoped it was from arousal rather than trepidation.

“Do you remember your safe word?” Ratchet planted his palm on Megatron’s array and circled the closed panel with his fingertips.

Megatron’s ventilations hitched. His fingers twitched. One crimson optic rolled toward Ratchet. “Turpentine,” he ground out. “Or stop, whichever I think of first.”

“Good.” Ratchet increased the pressure of his finger, tightening the circles, feeling the heat building beneath his dermal net. “And you’re going to use them.” He added a bit more pressure, heard the stifled sound in Megatron’s intake.

It was a good sound. It made something tighten in Ratchet’s internals, a wash of heat to chase away the irritation Megatron had fanned inside of him.

Megatron’s glossa swept over his lips. A shudder ran across his armor. His hips moved, in just the slightest of upward rocks.

“Won’t need to,” he said, and before Ratchet could say anything, he added, “but if I do, I know them.”

Progress!

Ratchet fought down his grin. “Open for me,” he murmured as he stroked Megatron’s panel, sensors detecting the shift-click of movement behind it. “I think you deserve a reward for that.”

Megatron wet his lips again. His attention turned to Ratchet full throttle, heat and fire in his optics.

He obeyed without a word, panel spiraling open, the head of his spike peeping into view.

Both panels, actually, Ratchet noticed approvingly. The scent of lubricant wafted upward. It glistened in the depths of Megatron's valve, mostly hidden in the vee of his thighs.

Ratchet rolled the pad of his thumb over the head of Megatron's spike, meaning to coax it free. He intended to make use of it tonight. Intended to ride Megatron to exhaustion, prove to him submission wasn't whatever rumor he'd picked up on the darknet. It was so, so much more.

Megatron sucked in a vent. The cables made an audible creak, like that of new thread getting its first stretch.

"Don't snap my ropes," Ratchet warned as he rubbed the head of Megatron's spike, persuading the thick length to pressurize.

"I won't," Megatron gritted out. He shifted, hips pushing minutely into Ratchet's hold, his field giving the first flicker of yielding.

Ratchet could taste it now, like warm charge and desire. It made his own vents quicken, lust rising within his circuits like a rinse in a hot solvent rack. He shifted on Megatron's thighs, valve cycling hot and ready.

"You might," Ratchet purred as Megatron fully pressurized into his hand. Ratchet gave him a long, squeezing stroke. A savoring one.

Megatron was more than a handful. He was thick in Ratchet's grip, the perfect width to stroke all of his internal sensors with every push, and a head flared enough to grind over his ceiling node on those deepest thrusts. Perched on top, Ratchet had control of everything.

It was delicious.

"Let me tell you how this is going to go," Ratchet continued, trying to keep his tone conversational, his optics catching and holding Megatron's.

"I'm going to frag you. I'm going to take your spike, again and again, and you're going to overload as often as you can. And then more."

Ratchet pumped Megatron's spike leisurely, his fingers painting swathes of pleasure over the sensory lines. Pre-fluid dribbled freely, moistening him with glistening trickles.

He leaned forward, free hand braced against the wall above Megatron's head, his thighs framing Megatron's spike. His ex-vents were a hot, wet puff over Megatron's lips, and Ratchet thrilled inwardly at the way Megatron watched him. The way Megatron's optics stayed locked on his.

Primus below he was a natural.

"You're going to overload until you can't anymore. Until you've drained your tanks dry." Ratchet rubbed his cheek over Megatron's, felt the quiver in Megatron's frame, the flexing of Megatron's field. "I'm going to wreck you, Megatron. And you're going to like it."

He licked the curve of Megatron's jaw, denta scraping lightly in his wake. He heard Megatron shiver, heard a thin whine in Megatron's vents, and more pre-fluid spilled from Megatron's spike

over his fingers. The quick throb-throb of it was even more telling.

“Stop me if I’m wrong,” Ratchet murmured, and gave Megatron’s spike a sharp squeeze.

Megatron jerked beneath him, hips pumping up in an aborted thrust, his heels scrabbling over the berth. The light braces gave a warning creak.

“If you are taunting me, medic, I will be sorely displeased,” Megatron gritted out, but the yearning in his field said it all.

Ratchet dragged his fingers down to the base of Megatron’s spike, index pressing on a lower node that made Megatron’s vents catch and his spinal strut arch. The sound he made was pure sin, a strangled groan, a flashfire in his field. He surged beneath Ratchet, demanding more.

Lust stole Ratchet’s next vent-cycle. It left him drowning in a dizzying wave of hunger. He swallowed a groan, his lips hovering over Megatron’s, inches away.

“Oh, I haven’t even begun,” he growled, and crashed his mouth over Megatron’s, glossa plunging inside for a heated kiss, a furnace of need clawing through his circuits and throbbing down into his valve.

The way Megatron relented beneath him, the quickly stifled near-whimper, the yielding of his frame and the throbbing of his spike – it all spoke to something Megatron craved, but hadn’t found a reference for. In a split-second, Ratchet had so many ideas he almost overloaded from the sheer potential of it, his valve snapping into view and lubricant dribbling down to paint Megatron’s upper thighs in lurid streaks of it.

Ratchet reined himself in on principle alone.

Megatron had allowed him all night.

There was a lot more yet to come.

Chapter 2

Onlining with a squeeze in his tanks, an urge to consume, a *hunger* was nothing new to Megatron. That damn fool's energon left him constantly wanting, on edge, waiting for satisfaction in any shape and form.

But it wasn't a thirst for real energon that squeezed Megatron's internals when his alarm alerted him he had to be on shift soon. It was a thirst for something else, brought upon by the echoes which haunted his recharge. Lingered memories of two evenings ago, when Ratchet had promised him pleasure, and followed through on the promise.

Megatron had never in his life interfaced to the point of blacking out from the sheer pleasure of it. He'd never felt as thrilled as he had when Ratchet rode him, again and again, the bonds around his wrist a constant reminder he was at Ratchet's mercy.

A safe mercy. Megatron had been trapped, but he'd felt safe, and he still wasn't sure which part of that was more frightening.

Megatron slid his legs over the side of the berth and lingered, hands braced on the edge. He rolled his head, easing the kinks in his neck, a passive scan alerting him to the fact he was alone. He did not know where Ravage was. The cassette had his own business, and besides, they weren't technically on a mission.

Ravage was allowed to do as he wished. And if he were gone, it meant Megatron faced no potential dangers.

They would be leaving Quartex's orbit today. They'd spent too long here already, but Megatron's arguments about wasted time had been completely overridden by Rodimus' much louder insistence their search was as much about the journey as it was the destination. Ultra Magnus had been on Megatron's side, but there was no stopping Rodimus when he was determined.

Admittedly, most of the crew sided with Rodimus as well. The moment they'd heard about Quartex and what it had to offer, the sense of excitement and enthusiasm had been palpable. Simmering tension had given way to fervor, and the crew had all but stampeded off the ship the moment the Lost Light docked.

Megatron forced himself to his feet. He staggered over to the storage cabinet, pulling out a cleaning cloth to wipe away recharge-gathered dust. He was exhausted, though he only had himself to blame.

He'd stayed up far too late, perched at a public console in the Lost Light's meager library, researching with Ravage on guard and fielding too many curious looks and questions from crewmembers who were bold enough to poke at him. The database was disappointingly light on information. Oh, it had plenty enough on history – Autobot sympathetic, of course – but when it came to interfacing, there were only dry articles about the mechanisms behind it. There was nothing useful about safe words and bondage and the hints of other types of play related to both.

Megatron had realized, with a growl, if he wanted to know more, he'd have to ask Ratchet. That had been enough to make him power down the console with a jab of his finger, his other hand rapping a nonsense rhythm on the desktop.

Megatron was not an untouched. He'd had his fair share of interface partners. He had, contrary to Ratchet's belief, allowed himself to indulge in various types of kinky interfacing behavior. He knew of bondage, but had little personal experience because he hadn't seen the draw of being restrained and at the mercy of another mech.

He hadn't expected that night to be anything more than something he endured for the sake of proving he could. He hadn't expected to overload, except perhaps out of a natural response to stimuli.

He most certainly hadn't expected the cravings to set in. The desire to find out more, to experience more, to feel more. To see what other pleasure Ratchet could wring from him, to hear Ratchet growling commands at him, to feel Ratchet's valve clamping tight around his spike as he perched over Megatron, lips twisted with pride.

More than that, he definitely hadn't expected the relief and the surge of trust spawned in his response when Ratchet had listened to him. When the rush of overloads had gotten to be too much, and his spike ached and his lines crackled, and he felt he were drowning in the fire.

He was still hard, and he didn't know how that was possible, not with his transfluid tank clenching near-empty and his frame drenched in condensation. And then Ratchet started pumping his hips again, valve dragging over the raw sensors of Megatron's spike, and despite his every effort, Megatron had tossed his head back and gasped out a plea.

"Wait," he'd said, hating himself for the weakness, but desperately needing a moment to catch his vents. His wrists had jerked in the bonds, his processor spun dizzily.

He waited for Ratchet to keep going, to ignore him. He waited for the barrage of taunts to come, teasing him for not being strong enough to endure.

He received neither.

Instead, Ratchet had risen up on his knees, Megatron's spike freed of his valve, lubricant and transfluid both dripping freely. He'd rested his hands on Megatron's chassis, over his spark, and he'd said,

"Tell me when."

Megatron had gulped in desperate vents, heated air, ripe with the scent of overloads and ozone and lubricant. He'd trembled in his bonds, limp on the berth, but his optics had taken in Ratchet's expression, the pleasure and the glee and the unexpected patience.

He'd wait there until Megatron told him to continue. And in that moment, trust and affection had spiraled so heavily in Megatron's spark he'd rattled right into another overload, swallowing down a wail before it could betray him.

The door to his suite slid open, startling him out of the memory. Megatron stiffened, and sent out a sensor sweep, rather than whirl toward it and betray his surprise. But it was only Ravage, slinking inside without making a single noise.

"The natives are restless," he said.

Megatron snorted. "Given how many of them spent the last week ashore, they should all be sated piles of quiet for the next month." He tossed the cloth into a laundry bin and gave himself a quick

check in the door mirror. He was presentable enough. "Find anything interesting?"

"Just this."

Ravage leapt up onto Megatron's berth and pulled a data chip from one of his compartments. He set it on the bedside table with a small click.

Megatron frowned as he picked up the chip, barely bigger than his fingertip. "Have you been poking around in the mainframe again?"

"Would I do that?" Ravage's voice effected an innocence no one believed. His tail swished as he grinned. "Not this time anyway. I made a discreet call and acquired that for you."

Curious.

Megatron pulled out his personal datapad and slotted the chip into it. He accessed it immediately, skimming the contents. Heat flooded his face, not that he'd ever admit his embarrassment aloud.

His vents coughed as he gave Ravage a sidelong look. "Dare I ask from who?"

"You probably don't want to know." Ravage's optics flashed with amusement. He lowered himself down, resting his chin on his folded forelegs.

Megatron didn't know whether to be grateful Ravage had come through for him, or embarrassed his subordinate had not only figured out what Megatron was searching for yesterday, but had decided to seek out information on Megatron's behalf. Either way, the material on this datachip was priceless. It was an idiot's guide to BDSM, to put it colloquially.

He powered down the datapad and tucked it back into his storage compartment. He didn't have the time to read it in depth at the moment. He had to be on shift shortly.

"Thank you," Megatron said, swallowing down the rest of his embarrassment. He was the former leader of the Decepticons. He was not ashamed of his berth proclivities. "Though if you do happen to stumble into the mainframe and come across anything of interest, feel free to share."

Ravage's optics had drifted shut, and he unshuttered one at that suggestion. "And exactly how does that fit into your change of spark?"

"Information is always good to have, no matter what position you're in."

"And the medic?"

Megatron tilted his head toward the berth, eyeing Ravage who had re-shuttered his optic and appeared to be in recharge. "What about him?" Megatron asked, his tone flat.

Tread carefully, his tone warned.

Ravage, however, was never one who had let such a tone intimidate him. His tail swished across the berth. "Are you serious about him?"

"It's not a relationship," Megatron said. He closed the supply cabinet with a loud snap. "It's also none of your business."

Weighty silence was Ravage's reply. Judgment without a look, without a word. He'd always been so very good at that. He and Soundwave both. Megatron missed his third's counsel, even as he already knew Soundwave would never forgive him.

Grinding his denta, Megatron mastered his emotions and hid them behind an impenetrable wall. "I'll be back later."

"No, you won't," Ravage said. He sounded amused as the comment chased Megatron out the door. It locked behind him.

Had to get in the last word, didn't he? Damn Ravage. It was no mystery where Soundwave had gotten his inscrutability from. Though there were very few who knew that particular secret.

Megatron headed to the command deck, only absently noting the crew members who scurried out of his path. Most didn't bother to greet him. Megatron recognized them only because he'd memorized the roster of his new 'crew', and Megatron used the term loosely. But as for whether or not he'd ever faced them across the battlefield, Megatron couldn't say for sure.

It had been a long war.

The door to the command bridge spiraled open and assaulted him with the noise of a dozen different consoles beeping and chirping and clicking their continued efforts. Megatron was here to relieve Ultra Magnus, but Rodimus was present as well, capering about with a grin on his face and a jaunty tilt to his spoiler.

"I told you, Magnus. Didn't I? I knew it was a good idea to stop here."

"So you did, Rodimus," Ultra Magnus replied in a distracted tone, his gaze focused on a datapad, his stylus moving quickly across it. "I still say you were lucky."

"Pfft. Of course I am. And did you hear that? Pfft." Rodimus grinned even brighter. "Chromedome taught me. I finally figured it out."

"Congratulations."

Ultra Magnus could not have sounded less enthused.

"Dare I ask what has you so excited?" Megatron asked as he approached the two of them.

He glanced around the bridge, taking note of who was present today. The rotating bridge crew had gotten used to his presence by now, but occasionally, there was a substitute.

Rodimus beamed like he'd solved all the mysteries of the universe. "We have a heading," he declared triumphantly, and planted his hands on his hips. "We're about to be one step closer to finding the Knights of Cybertron."

Megatron's orbital ridges drifted upward. "And how did you accomplish that?"

"Nautica." Rodimus' spoiler twitched up and down in a mad dance of glee. "Thanks to my leadership, of course. She found a book on Quartex in some antique shop, and it was written in an old Cybertronian dialect that we translated and voila!" Rodimus spread out his hands and turned in a

quick circle, pointing upward at the ceiling with a triumphant finger. “We have made progress.”

Megatron wondered if the look on his face reflected the disbelief he felt on the inside. “A book,” he repeated. “On an organic planet catered to those looking for the quickest means of achieving satisfaction. And you think this is a legitimate source.”

“I think it’s worth checking out.” Rodimus pointed at Megatron, bare inches from poking him in the chestplate directly over his Autobrand. “Unless you’ve got a better idea Mr. Co-Captain who hasn’t made a single worthwhile contribution to our mission yet.”

Megatron twisted his jaw. “And where, perchance, does this book tell us to go?”

“The Hyades Cluster,” Ultra Magnus answered, still bent over his datapad as though it had the secret to understanding Rodimus scrawled across the screen.

“The Hyades-- Rodimus, that’s halfway across the universe,” Megatron said with an exasperated vent. “It’s a sharp angle from the direction we’ve been following from the Matrix.”

Rodimus folded his arms, lips set stubbornly. “Your point?”

Primus below.

Megatron scrubbed at his forehead, a familiar ache developing. It had a name, this processor ache did, and its name was Rodimus. The mech simply didn’t operate by any sort of logic Megatron could understand, unless that logic devolved to “I do what I want because I want, nyah.”

Which was, actually, a lot like Starscream’s logic. Primus, but the two were aggravatingly similar at times. Though Megatron considered Starscream someone more of a challenge, and more of a survivor. This wannabe Prime was merely a nuisance.

He had to give Starscream credit. The Seeker always did a fantastic job of keeping Megatron from getting too complacent.

“If you don’t understand why this is a terrible idea, then I can’t explain it to you,” Megatron said wearily. He slanted a look at Ultra Magnus. “Surely you don’t think this is the best course of action?”

Ultra Magnus slotted the stylus into the holder. He tucked the datapad under his arm and looked up. “I think that up until now we’ve been following the instructions of a map no one can duplicate or accurately remember, one which was taken from an artifact that has since been destroyed. At this point, scribbled coordinates in a dusty tome on Quartex are as believable as anything else.”

Megatron nearly gaped.

Rodimus had no such restraint. He pumped his fists into the air. “Yes!” He did a little dance as Megatron’s armor twitched, and then he spun toward the navigation console. “Mainframe, set course for the Hyades Cluster.”

“Setting course now,” Mainframe said.

The ache in Megatron’s head grew in size.

“And with that, I’m out.” Rodimus dusted his hands like he’d done some great work, when all he’d done was badger everyone into seeing things his way. “Things to do. People to see. Drinks to drink.” He winked. “Have fun!”

He wriggled his fingers in what Megatron assumed was meant to be a parting gesture before Rodimus left the bridge, a skip to his step. It was impossible to take the child seriously. No wonder Optimus had wanted Megatron on this trip. They’d needed adult supervision, and Ultra Magnus did not count.

He was more the older sibling who protested, but ended up getting dragged into his younger sibling’s pace anyway.

Megatron cycled a ventilation and shifted his focus to Ultra Magnus. “What have you to report?”

“Other than our change in course?” Ultra Magnus clasped his hands behind his back, standing at parade rest. “Nothing of concern, captain.”

“Well, that’s a nice change of pace.” Megatron stepped up to the main console, logging himself as on-shift and the main point of contact.

Ultra Magnus fidgeted in his peripheral vision, an occurrence odd in itself. Ultra Magnus did not fidget. He was too precise for that.

“There is one small matter I’d like to bring to your attention, however.”

“Go on.”

“It involves Ratchet.”

Megatron stiffened. His fingers stilled on the console. “What about him?” he asked in an even tone which hopefully betrayed nothing.

Surely Ultra Magnus was not so bold as to ask him about their relationship – and Megatron used the term loosely – right here on the bridge. More than that, how had he known?

“I am concerned he is not getting an adequate amount of rest and as a consequence is overworking himself far beyond the capabilities of his frame,” Ultra Magnus said, never one to use three words when ten would do. “If this persists, he will not only suffer a forced system reset, but he will also reduce the capable medics we have aboard the ship.”

Megatron half-turned. “Are you asking me to order Ratchet to take some time off?” It was absurd. Since when did Ratchet obey anyone? Or did Ultra Magnus expect Megatron to track down and call up Optimus and get him to talk some sense into his medic?

Ultra Magnus met his gaze without flinching. But he swayed a little to the left, toward the door, as though suddenly eager to make an escape. “A direct order might be the only means of achieving compliance.”

“You didn’t ask Rodimus to do this.”

“Of course not.” A look of consternation flickered briefly over Ultra Magnus’ face before it was washed away. “You have more... influence than he does.”

Megatron stared.

Ultra Magnus stared back.

There was a lot unsaid in the space between them, and Megatron was partly afraid to ask for clarification. Had Ultra Magnus asked him because Ratchet had never recognized Rodimus' authority? Or was it for another reason?

Maybe he was aware of the relationship budding between Ratchet and Megatron. If so, that made this request even more suspect.

Did Ultra Magnus honestly believe Megatron had any control over Ratchet? Or was he asking because Megatron was captain (co-captain if Rodimus asked) and therefore had authority over Ratchet? Either way, it was an odd request, and Megatron wasn't sure what to make of it.

"I make no guarantees," Megatron managed and turned his attention back to the console, which listed all of the Lost Light's major systems and their current statuses. "But I will attempt to encourage Ratchet to rest. Will that suffice?"

"It does. Thank you." Ultra Magnus dipped his head in a show of respect, which was a novelty on the Lost Light. No other crewmember around here seemed to understand what it meant to show some decorum. "Now if you have need of me--"

"I won't," Megatron interjected, and tossed a brief half-smile over his shoulder. "Enjoy your time off, Ultra Magnus. There are others to call on if a need arises."

Gratitude flickered in Ultra Magnus' field before it was whisked away, as if embarrassed he'd let it slip. "Yes, sir."

Ultra Magnus spun on a heelstrut – a perfectly executed 180 degree turn – and strode off the bridge. Megatron bet that if he timed Ultra Magnus footsteps, they would match some internal, immaculate rhythm. Magnus was wound tighter than a spring, and as fascinating as it would be to see him snap, Megatron hoped to circumvent it somehow.

It was on the list.

After all, Ultra Magnus was much more useful in a functional state, rather than a mess of agitation and disarray.

The bridge quieted in Ultra Magnus and Rodimus' absence. With the Lost Light on a determined course – two week's arrival time by Mainframe's estimates – the background chatter dulled to a barely audible murmur. The differences were striking.

Rodimus' presence meant the bridge was loud and boisterous and often full of crew members loitering about who weren't even on shift, but merely tarrying because they could. Or because one of their friends were working. Rodimus himself was occasionally found dozing in the captain's chair, or ensconced in one of the many console or card games the crew brought with them on shift.

Ultra Magnus' presence demanded respect and the absence of games. But he allowed conversation, so long as it didn't interfere with their work, and so the occasional laugh or aside could be heard. Ultra Magnus often paced when he was outright on the bridge, or scribbled in a datapad.

Megatron's presence called for utter silence. They worked as though they expected a blaster shot to the back for so much as coughing or ventilating too loudly. The atmosphere was tense, expectant, and one could hear a bearing drop from the furthest reaches of the room.

Just last week, Highbrow had swung about in his chair, causing it to make an ungainly creak. Gears had been so startled, he fell out of his own seat, got his feet tangled in the stand, and knocked down his sealed cup of energon, causing it to spill everywhere. The sequence of events had been ridiculous, and Megatron had only lifted an orbital ridge. He expected a roll of laughter, muffled titters even.

Nothing. More silence.

The other crewmembers stared as Gears put himself to rights and Highbrow whispered – *whispered!* – an apology as he brought over a cleaning drone to tend to the mess.

Megatron's crew weren't comfortable in his presence. Fortunately, he didn't need them to be. He only required they do their duties.

Megatron reviewed Ultra Magnus' shift report, entered into the ship database in a timely fashion – unlike the scribbles of lateness which could be found in Rodimus' reports. He saw nothing of concern, and plenty which were unnecessary but important to Ultra Magnus. Honestly, if someone didn't replace that stripped rivet in the aft deck soon, Megatron would do it himself if only so he didn't have to hear about it anymore.

Ultra Magnus' other request lingered at the back of his processor. On a hunch, Megatron reviewed the medical bay's staffing schedule. According to it, First Aid was the medic on hand at the moment, with Ratchet on call for emergencies. How many cubes of engex would Megatron bet Ratchet was present in the medbay anyway?

More cubes than he was allowed to consume, Megatron guessed.

He locked the system and briefly surveyed the bridge. No one would be bothered if he stepped away to do a quick sweep of the ship. In fact, they'd probably encourage it.

"Mainframe, I am going to be off bridge for about an hour or so. You have my comm if anything requiring my attention comes up," Megatron said.

"Yes, Captain. Logging you as 'away' now."

There was something to be said about the efficiency fear could inspire. Megatron keyed a quick remote access to his mobile unit, tucked said unit into an arm compartment, and exited the bridge. The door had barely whooshed shut behind him before he heard the low murmur of conversation begin to engage.

Megatron headed for the medical bay, three decks down and a quarter of the way across the ship. He pulled out the datapad Ravage had given him, intending on skimming the contents as he walked. It made him seem less threatening, he knew, to be so busy while in the corridor, rather than eying every Autobot he passed.

Perception was not often reality but who listened to reason anymore?

He didn't know how Ravage had acquired this information, and he'd never ask, but there were hundreds of articles with connecting links, pictures, and testimonials. Some of them were based on other species, more organic, but Megatron supposed some of the principles were the same.

It boiled down to trust. The types of play differed, and the kinks explored ranged from the obscene to the common, but the connecting factor was that it all required trust. Trust your partner would listen to you, and trust you'd be honest with your partner.

Honesty.

Megatron nearly snorted aloud.

They couldn't very well be honest with each other. They weren't even honest with themselves.

There was one topic header that interested him. To be fair, there were many, but one in particular called for further exploration more than others. It discussed pain, and the erotic application of it.

Megatron frowned. Pain was something they were programmed to avoid. Why would anyone seek it out? Why would someone mix it into pleasure? It did not compute.

And yet...

He felt so disconnected to his frame some days. Between the multiple rebuilds, the holes in his protoform, the space-time material eating away at his very existence, sometimes he onlined with his hands tingling because he wasn't sure they were still attached to his frame. Sometimes, even pleasure was hard to grasp. He suspected the fool's energon was to blame in part, but the truth was, Megatron knew he was living on borrowed time.

He'd had too many rebuilds, too many close calls. He should be a dead a half-dozen times over, but the universe kept conspiring to return him to the madness.

There were times he woke in the middle of the night, shaking and wide-opticked, unable to decide if he were even functioning anymore, so disparate from his frame did he feel. His mind, his spark, they were all that seemed real anymore, and even the former was occasionally suspect thanks to Trepan's tinkering. The rest was a cardboard cutout.

Pain, controlled pain, perhaps was the reminder he needed. To remember he was alive and still had something to fight for. He wanted to be grounded in his frame again, attached to his protoform, rather than feeling as though his spark floated endlessly in an untethered chamber. He'd always felt strongest when he was fighting for the right to function.

It was certainly something to ponder.

Megatron powered down the datapad and slipped it back into his storage compartment as the main entrance to the medical center came into view. An odd squirm nestled in his tanks, and he wasn't sure if it was trepidation or excitement. He grimaced at the thought of how Ratchet might react to the mere suggestion he take a break.

Megatron strode into the medical center with a set to his shoulders that screamed purpose and authority. Sadly, there was no one in immediate view to appreciate his arrival. Through the sheer transsteel, First Aid was visible as he tended to the half-dozen or so crewmembers trapped in a sort of permanent stasis. No one was sure why yet, it was an ongoing mystery like so many things

circulating around this ship.

Ratchet, who should not have been here, could be seen through the open doorway in the equipment storage room. He looked deeply engrossed in... cleaning? Seriously? That's what was so important he couldn't possibly enjoy an off-shift?

Perhaps Ultra Magnus had a point.

Megatron braced himself and ventured inside, leaning against the door frame.

"I don't need help, Aid," Ratchet grouched as he deftly disassembled a device Megatron could not name. It seemed to consist mostly of a central unit and multiple lengths of tubing.

"You're not supposed to be here," Megatron said.

Ratchet looked up, something flashing in his optics, before he snorted and went back to removing bits of tubing, inspecting them with a critical optic. "Last I checked, you're not a medic either."

"I am, however, captain."

"Co-captain."

Megatron arched an orbital ridge. "Echoing Rodimus? This is clearly a sign you should be enjoying your time off, not hiding in your medical bay."

"It's not mine anymore. It's Aid's," Ratchet said, but he cut Megatron a glare at the comparison to Rodimus.

Megatron folded his arms. "Really? Well, you should tell him that. And yourself." He made a show of looking around. "Still looks like yours to me."

Ratchet's optics narrowed. "Is there a reason you came here? Because you don't look injured, and it's not time for your daily dose of poison." His fingers tightened around the tubing.

"You're supposed to be off-shift." Megatron leveled Ratchet with a look, putting every ounce of authority he'd ever acquired into his voice. "Most mechs take the opportunity to rest. Indulge in personal projects. Recharge. Have fun. Normal things."

"Normal things," Ratchet echoed, and the disdain dripping from his tone made Megatron shiver, so icy was it. "Well, most mechs can frag off. I'm busy. There's too much to do."

With that, he bent over the machine and start tugging at the tubes again, though with more force than before. His field spiked, a brief lash of irritation against Megatron's, before it withdrew into an icy whirl around his frame.

Megatron straightened. "Ratchet." He planted his feet and braced himself. He'd faced down Starscream. Surely he could face down an old medic. "That wasn't a suggestion."

Ratchet froze. Even his vents stuttered. His fingers went still, tangled as they were around the tubing. He lifted his gaze back to Megatron so slowly, Megatron swore he could hear the creak of his gears, click-clicking into place.

“If it’s not a suggestion, that means it was an order,” Ratchet said carefully. He set aside the tubing with methodical precision. “And I’m wondering when you started thinking you could come in here and order me around, because it better not have been right after I started taking you into my berth.”

The last was a growl, a threat by any other name.

Megatron worked his jaw, his reaction running the gamut from outraged to frustrated before he settled on offended. “Contrary to your belief, what we do in the berth has no bearing on how I behave as the commanding officer on this vessel,” he bit out, tight and contained. “Specifically your commanding officer.”

“Well, that’s the kicker isn’t it, since here we are standing right smack in the middle of a blatant conflict of interest.” Ratchet moved the equipment aside, his armor fluttering around his frame. “Since you can’t be both.”

“If I was dealing with a reasonable mech, this wouldn’t even be an issue,” Megatron ground out, a touch too loud.

He peered over his shoulder, but no one was around to pay them any mind. First Aid was still with the comatose patients, no one was in the waiting area, and even the medibot was out of sight.

Still.

He stepped fully into the storage room, closing them inside, which was effective, but also not, because now he was closer to the storm that was Ratchet’s field. And the fury, which was reflected in Ratchet’s face.

“Ah, yes, I’m the unreasonable one.” Ratchet snorted, his tone this shade of snide. He scooped up armfuls of tubing like they were what had offended him. “And not, for example, the very same mech who got angry and decided the entire planet had to suffer for it.”

Heat turned to ice inside of Megatron, the chill of shame. There were things Megatron wanted to change, and things he would never regret, and somehow, Ratchet managed to stomp on both.

“If you’re looking for someone to be angry at, take a look in the mirror. I didn’t coerce you into my berth, medic. You leapt in of your own accord,” Megatron near-snarled, and his hands formed fists at his side, before the weakness overtook him.

Leashed violence, that was what had become of him. He would not strike out.

Would not, could not? He wasn’t sure anymore.

“Which still doesn’t give you the right to come down here and order me around,” Ratchet hissed, his field spiking, a lash of liquid nitrogen against the heat of Megatron’s.

Megatron twisted his jaw. “No, it doesn’t. Which is why I’m here as captain of this ship. And as captain, I’m telling you to take some fragging time off like a normal mech before you crash and burn.”

“When I need advice about the limits of my own frame, I’ll ask a professional, thank you very much.” Ratchet bundled up his tubing and stomped toward the door. “Now get out of my way. These need to be disposed of properly.”

Megatron held his ground, forcing Ratchet to stop within a stride of him. “Were you this insubordinate with Optimus?”

“Yes.” Ratchet’s smile was so falsely sweet it stoked the fires of his anger. “Only I actually respected his authority. Can’t say the same for you.”

It hurt. It hurt far more than he thought it would.

Trust, the little datapad whispered to him. *Trust*, Ratchet had said, only a few nights ago. How could they even begin to have trust without respect? Megatron always had a healthy respect for the Autobot CMO, but clearly, that was not returned.

Megatron ventilated in and out. “Very well,” he said, through gritted denta, and a building wave of emotion he couldn’t define. “The next time an order needs to be issued, you can take it from Ultra Magnus or Rodimus. That should satisfy your respect for authority.”

He spun on a heel and slammed his palm against the panel, demanding the door open for him. And it did, springing aside, leaving him free to storm out of the storage room, Ratchet behind him.

If the medic said anything, Megatron didn’t hear him, not through the roaring in his audials, and rapid working of his intake as he struggled to swallow a torrent of emotion. Much of which he did not care to feel.

Hurt? He had no business feeling hurt. This was nothing. Not relationship, not friendship. They should have stuck to what they were good at. Interfacing. Fragging. That was easy. That was doable.

Trust? Respect? Hah. Neither existed.

They were a walking disaster.

Chapter 3

There was exasperation. There was anger. There was indignation.

And then there was Ratchet, right smack in the center of all three.

He stomped out of the supply room and into the reprocessing center. He dumped his armload of stripped tubing into the recycler, shoving them down with more force than necessary. He vibrated on the inside, armor jittering, anger nestling into a hot ball of fire deep in his tanks.

How dare he? How *dare* he?

Megatron hadn't been so concerned when he'd directed his forces to bomb Cybertron, had he? Not been so concerned when his army had laid waste to the planet and countless other planets. Had he been concerned about all the soldiers Ratchet repaired again and again, only to send them back out to the battlefield once more?

Of course not.

Disgust rattled through Ratchet. Worse that it wasn't entirely directed at Megatron. Worse that he saved the majority of it for himself.

Hypocrite, that's what he was. Conflict of interest, that's what he'd snapped at Megatron, ignoring the fact he was the one who needed to look in the mirror. Fragging Megatron? There was no bigger conflict of interest.

The squirm returned to his internals. Guilt and shame, tangling into a miasma. It asked him what he thought he was doing, interfacing the biggest threat to Cybertron in the history of ever. How dare he betray the memory of those lost just for the sake of an overload or three, no matter how good.

Ratchet snarled and smacked his hands on a low table. He leaned forward, shoulders canted, head hanging. His processor ached. Now his palms stung.

He reached for the anger, and he held onto it, because that was easier than confronting the disquiet wriggling inside of him. He and Megatron didn't have a relationship, he told himself. It was fragging. Just fragging. It didn't mean anything.

Megatron was trying to change. Or at least he claimed he was. Maybe it was all a trick, maybe it wasn't. Ratchet didn't trust him. Ratchet didn't trust himself. He was supposed to walk away after the first time, the second time, the third time, the--

He was in too deep to walk away now.

Ratchet cycled several ventilations. He forced calm where there wasn't any. The last thing he wanted to do was attract attention to himself. He didn't need First Aid giving him a knowing look. Or a pointed one.

"You're not supposed to be here," was all First Aid had said when Ratchet strode into the medical center this morning.

He was right, and Ratchet knew he was. He knew the burden he intended to lay on First Aid's shoulders. But his grip on his position was a clenched fist, and he couldn't seem to loosen his fingers and let go.

(Not his fingers, a guilty part of him whispered. Not his fingers at all.)

Ratchet pushed away from the table. He forced a step, and then another. He headed out the door; he swerved past the equipment room. He pointedly did not look in the direction of the intensive care unit. He found a door that had seen far too much use, and slipped inside his habsuite from there.

It felt weird to be here in the Lost Light's equivalent of daytime. His suite looked different, when he wasn't too exhausted to care where he crashed, so long as he did.

His suite was a mess. Not in the traditional sense, but in the sense there was no one around to bother about it. Dusty. Disorganized. Haphazard stacks. He supposed he really should do something.

Ratchet rolled up his metaphorical sleeves and got to work. He told himself it wasn't because he actually had been spending more time here lately. The fact Megatron was around more often than not had nothing to do with it either. Ratchet doubted Megatron would show tonight. Not after that argument.

Guilt seeped back in. Not for the memories he betrayed, but for the harsh words he'd spoken. He'd meant them, but not because he wanted to hurt Megatron. Because he wanted to remind himself.

This is the grave where you've made your bed, Ratchet. Look at all the corpses you're sleeping beside.

Fragging Megatron was easy. Living with Megatron was a million times harder. He shouldn't even be trying to live with Megatron. He shouldn't be working at it like they had a legitimate relationship.

He wanted it.

He shouldn't have, but he did.

That, Ratchet decided, was the greatest betrayal of all.

~

Later, his door chimed.

Ratchet froze in the middle of a novel and stared at the door. He frowned, confused. No one came to visit him. No one dared. Well, perhaps Rung might, but he had problems of his own right now.

No one bothered Ratchet anymore. Not since... well, not since Drift.

His door chimed again.

Ratchet set his datapad aside and rose from the chair, joints creaking, curiosity swelling inside of him. He opened the door, unsure who he'd find, but even more surprised it was Megatron. His face

was without expression, his field muted, but the way he stared at Ratchet spoke volumes.

“Well,” he prompted, when a moment of silence stretched far too long. “Are you going to let me in?”

“I’m not going to apologize, if that’s what you’re after,” Ratchet replied. He didn’t move, blocking the doorway.

Megatron shook his head. “It’s not. Because I am not here to apologize either.” He slanted a look to the left and right. Pointed. People would talk, if they saw him standing outside Ratchet’s door.

Ratchet stepped back, gesturing Megatron inside. “Just so long as we’re clear.”

“As transteel.” Megatron moved beyond the frame, letting the door slide shut behind them. And just in time, too. Voices echoed from down the hall.

“You cleaned,” Megatron observed as he hovered, moving no further than a few feet from the door, hands clasped behind his back.

Ratchet snorted. “You noticed.” This would be the point where he offered his guests refreshments of some kind. He didn’t intend to do so; he was still quite miffed. “If you’re not after an apology, why are you here?”

“If you didn’t want me to be, why’d you invite me inside?” Megatron countered, his field seeping out, tentative as it brushed over Ratchet’s. Perhaps to surmise his emotional state.

Ratchet tossed Megatron a look and moved to his cabinet. Megatron couldn’t have any, but that didn’t mean Ratchet couldn’t indulge. And right now, he needed a drink. He didn’t care if it was rude.

“Because the ship is full of busybodies, and I don’t need anyone sticking their nose into something that isn’t their business.” Ratchet pulled out a few single-serve packets of engex and tipped them into a cube. “Anything interesting I should know about?”

Megatron finally moved, though only to examine Ratchet’s bookshelf, now actually filled with things rather than dust. “We’re on our way to the Hyades Cluster. Apparently, Rodimus is under the impression we can find a clue concerning the Knights of Cybertron there.”

Ratchet flopped down into the only available chair, now that it was clear of a pile of medical equipment in need of tinkering. “You don’t sound like you believe him.”

“I think it’s a fool’s errand as much as this is a fool’s quest.” Megatron tugged out a datapad with a finger. “I was outvoted.”

Ratchet snorted. “It’s amazing how well Rodimus can convince Magnus sometimes. Just when you think he’s got a lick of sense, Rodimus comes along and waves his aft and the next thing you know, we’re off on another adventure.” He tilted his head, Megatron’s first statement catching up. “Wait. Fool’s quest? If it’s so foolish, why are you here?”

Megatron arched an orbital ridge. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I mean, other than to save your spark.” Ratchet waved him off. “You could have stayed behind on

Cybertron. In a cell granted, but still.”

“Within Starscream’s grasp? Perish the thought.” Megatron bent over the datapad, paging through the contents. “I thought you more intelligent than that, medic.”

“I have a name.”

“And occasionally, I’ll remember to use it.”

Aft.

Ratchet gulped his engex, savoring the heated burn as it slid down his intake and coiled in his tanks. Better the burn than the wriggle of self-reproach.

“We should just be honest here,” he said at length, an exasperated sigh hissing from his vents. “What we’re doing is pointless.”

Megatron half-turned, looking up from his datapad. “Which part?”

“This.” Ratchet made a broad gesture, encompassing everything. “All of it. You and me. It’s not a relationship. And it’s never going to be. It’s just two mechs who spend a lot of time clanging.”

“Is that so?” Megatron swept his finger over the datapad, cutting it off. He then tucked it into a compartment. Ratchet didn’t know which one it was.

He supposed it didn’t matter. Most of them he’d never read. Most of them weren’t even his. They were on the ship when he moved in.

“It is. Sooner or later, you’re going to go through with whatever scheme you’ve made, and whatever this is will be over.” Ratchet downed the last of his engex to punctuate his point. It made him bold, willing to finally speak his mind.

Or maybe he just wanted to hurt.

Megatron tilted his head. “You think I’m insincere?”

“I think you’re exactly who you’ve always been.” Ratchet straightened his redolent slouch. There was a tone to Megatron’s voice now, a tone he wasn’t sure he liked.

Megatron frowned. He sank onto the edge of the berth, his optics never leaving Ratchet’s. “You think this is all a farce,” he said. “And that includes allowing myself into your berth.”

Ratchet propped his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his chin on his palm. “I think that there is no path you’re unwilling to take,” he corrected. “But I also think that as long as you’re sincere, it’s a moot point.”

“Except you think I’m not.”

“I don’t know,” Ratchet whooshed a vent, close to exasperation, maybe closer to panic. He wanted to trust Megatron, but he was afraid of how deep the betrayal would cut in the end.

He’d trusted Pharma, hadn’t he?

“Look, we should just stick to what we’re good at,” Ratchet finally said. He scuffed one heel against the floor, the scrape of metal on metal an obnoxious noise.

“And that would be?”

“Fragging.” Because it was easy. Because it required nothing more than physical connection. Ratchet didn’t have to give anything of himself he hadn’t already gave.

Megatron, however, arched an orbital ridge. He leaned back, hands braced behind him, his pose casual, but the clamp of his armor suggesting otherwise.

The distance between them stretched a lot further than a few strides.

“The rest doesn’t matter,” Ratchet continued, plowing forward, because that had always been his trademark. “Whether you’re here for redemption or because you’re trying to escape punishment, it just...” He trailed off, frustration eating at him, his words as much a tangle as his emotions.

“Doesn’t matter,” Megatron echoed, and his jaw set. His optics darkened, his field unreadable, what little of it he offered.

“Yes.”

Megatron stared at him. That he didn’t confirm or deny either endgame was neither a relief nor a worry. No one had ever been able to successfully predict Megatron’s moves. Not even with Prowl with all his calculations and behavioral studies and hours upon hours spent watching vids and surveillance.

Megatron’s plans had only been as obvious as he wanted them to be. He played the rest very close to his chassis. Why would this be any different?

“And what if--” Megatron broke off. He paused, his gaze darting elsewhere, and if Ratchet didn’t know better, he’d think that Megatron was uncertain. “What if that’s not enough for me?”

Ratchet rubbed at his chevron. “What’s not enough?”

“Interfacing without any other connection.”

“You can’t tell me you want to try for something serious,” Ratchet said, once he’d picked his jaw up from where it had dropped. His spark throbbed in his chassis, and he jerked upright.

Megatron scrubbed his hands down the top of his thighs. He rapped his fingers over his knees and returned that inscrutable, coal-fire gaze to Ratchet. “And what if I were?”

“I’d say you were crazy,” Ratchet said, because he couldn’t believe his audials. Was this really Megatron sitting in front of him? Or was it all part of some ploy?

“Why?”

“Because it’s ridiculous!” Ratchet threw his hands into the air and lurched out of his seat, catching himself for a moment as the engex rushed straight to his processor. Damn, he hadn’t known it was that potent. “You’re you, and I’m the Chief Medical Officer--”

Megatron slid off the bed with a light thump. “Retired.”

Ratchet shoved a finger in Megatron’s direction, alarmed to find it shaking. “That is not the point,” he growled.

“Then what is?” Megatron demanded.

“The point is that you’re Megatron! And I can’t--” Ratchet choked on his next words, because that was dangerously close to admitting things he didn’t want to admit to himself, much less to Megatron. That would be too much like having a real relationship, and that wasn’t what they did.

Ratchet swallowed it down, the truth and the admission. He refused to admit he couldn’t handle the guilt. He searched for something, anything else to say, before the silence dragged on too long and betrayed him as much as saying the words aloud would.

“Can’t what?” Megatron asked, his voice less demanding, more curious as he moved closer, into field range, the sense of it tentative but purposeful.

“Can’t manage to keep an amica much less a potential endura,” Ratchet finished, albeit lamely. It was better than the truth. He folded his arms, angling away from Megatron. “Not that I want you auditioning for either. It’s just too complicated.”

Megatron lifted his chin. “And you prefer simple.”

“I *prefer* not having a moral crisis every time I wake up in the morning with your transfluid on my armor!” Ratchet snapped, his energy field broiling out, slapping Megatron in the face as effectively as a physical blow would.

And then his words echoed in his audials. Ratchet reared back, optics wide, as he realized what he’d admitted aloud. The guilt, the shame, the *weakness*. How could he let Megatron see it?

He clamped his mouth shut so fast he swore his denta clicked together. He retreated another step, and then a third. There was a chasm between them now, and Ratchet hastily looked away. To safety elsewhere, only it wasn’t because his berth was there, and he’d spent far too much time on it with Megatron as of late.

Silence.

Nothing save the clicking-click of Ratchet’s unmaintained vents, and the whuff of Megatron’s clean fans.

“Then the way I see it, we have two options,” Megatron finally said, but haltingly, as though he was having as much trouble with words as Ratchet. “One, I can walk out of this room, and we can both behave as though I never walked in here in the first place. Or two, we can stop pretending.”

Ratchet hunched his shoulders. “Who’s pretending?”

Megatron hissed a ventilation. His armor drew tight to his frame, making his transformation seams nigh invisible. “We both are, if it’s any consolation. But that doesn’t answer the question.”

“I don’t want you to walk out.” Ratchet dragged his hands over his head. “I just want this

conversation to be over so we can return to some semblance of normal because I don't want to deal with this right now."

What even qualified as normal anymore? This quest certainly didn't. This relationship – not a relationship! – didn't. Nothing was normal anymore, but Ratchet needed something to be, because he was losing his mind.

Megatron worked his intake. "Fair enough."

Conceding, perhaps, because he recognized Ratchet stood on a ragged edge, and his ventilations reflected that. His field was a chaotic whirl he couldn't seem to master, and he didn't know if his head spun because of the unexpectedly potent engex, or because of the choice Megatron had presented and Ratchet wasn't ready to make.

Red optics slid past Ratchet, and then Megatron started to move, not toward Ratchet, not like earlier. But away from him, past him, toward the door.

"I'll comm you later," Megatron said.

"Wait." Ratchet's hand shot out, fingers wrapping around Megatron's wrist before he even made the conscious decision to do so. "Where are you going?"

Megatron paused, looked down at the hold on his wrist, and then up at Ratchet. "We aren't in a relationship," he said, with the tone of someone speaking to an errant youngling.

Or Rodimus.

"And the mood has passed to frag, as you so elegantly put it," he continued. "Therefore, I'm leaving."

He didn't, however, try to jerk his arm free.

Ratchet's hand lingered. He couldn't seem to make himself let go. Not with disappointment surging through him. And maybe, a tinge of regret, too.

"But--"

"What else do you expect me to do?" Megatron asked, too soft to be a demand, and if Ratchet had to put a word to it, he'd say Megatron was hurt. Which was utterly ridiculous.

Ratchet gnawed on his bottom lip. His fingers twitched around Megatron's wrist before he managed a light squeeze. "Stay," he asked.

The look Megatron leveled on him was nothing short of confused. "To what end?"

Argh.

Of course he would push for an answer. Of course he would. And Ratchet knew – knows – he was being manipulated. Megatron knew all the right buttons to push, to get Ratchet to say what he wasn't ready to say.

Ratchet vented loudly. Tiredly. "To the end where we sit down and figure this out like two mechs

who actually have a clue how to function like... like..."

"Like partners," Megatron finished for him. He turned fully toward Ratchet, resting his free hand over the one Ratchet had on his wrist.

"Yes. Like partners, frag it." Ratchet let his hand be tugged free, let himself be tugged toward the berth, though all Megatron did was sit on the edge of it. "If you want me to admit it, fine. But don't leave here in a sulk because I won't do it right away."

"I wasn't sulking." Megatron urged Ratchet closer, until he stood nearly between Megatron's knees, his hand still caught in a gentle hold. "And I wasn't asking for a promise."

Ratchet's orbital ridge crinkled. "Then what--"

"I only wanted to know if there was potential," Megatron said with a sharp vent. He squeezed Ratchet's hand, tugging him another step forward, close enough Ratchet could feel the whuff of his ex-vents.

Ratchet's armor fluttered. Anger flashed through his lines like fire, before fatigue petered it out into a puff of smoke. "You are a pain in my aft," he sighed. "Frag if I know why I can't seem to get rid of you."

Megatron's lips curved. He pulled Ratchet's hand to his mouth, his lips brushing over the tip of Ratchet's fingertips. "Because you don't want to."

Ratchet's shoulders sank. "Don't put words in my mouth," he grumbled even as he drifted forward, until he was firmly planted between Megatron's thighs, close enough for their armor to touch and warmth to seep between them.

"I could always use my mouth for other purposes," Megatron murmured. He drew Ratchet's fingers between his lips, glossa flick-flicking across them.

A shiver danced up Ratchet's spinal strut. "Is this you flirting?"

"If it isn't, then I've severely confused my behavioral tells." Megatron chuckled. He pressed a kiss to Ratchet's palm, glossa leaving a spot of moisture behind.

Ratchet worked his intake. A tremble raced through his frame, pooling southward, in his groin. His spark skipped a cycle or two, as all the emotional tension decided there was no better exorcism than the exchange of transfluid.

"I guess that means you're back in the mood," Ratchet said, aiming for glib.

"Well, you were right about one thing." Megatron's knees slid inward, trapping Ratchet between them, invitation clear in the sizzling press of his field. "This is the part we're good at. That is, if you're still interested."

Ratchet eased his hand free of Megatron's and gripped both of Megatron's wrists at once. He leaned forward, forcing Megatron back, pinning Megatron's hands to the berth. Left off balance, Megatron's chassis pressed to Ratchet's windshield. His groin nestled right against Megatron's, a stirring heat behind his panel matching what emanated from Megatron's.

Thank Primus the berth put Megatron at the perfect height.

“That depends.” Ratchet squeezed Megatron’s hands, a subtle warning, a show of force, a reminder of the ropes from several nights ago, and did not miss the shiver rippling over Megatron’s armor. “I want to frag you over this berth. Are you going to let me?”

Megatron’s thighs closed in around his hips. His engine rumbled into a higher pitch. “What sequence of events has ever led you to think I would demand otherwise?”

Ratchet grinned.

“Just wanted to be sure.” He leaned forward until his mouth found the firm vulnerability of Megatron’s intake.

It bobbed beneath Ratchet’s lips. His armor shuddered. He tasted of heat and lust, and Megatron’s field reflected it, twining hotly with the edges of Ratchet’s own. His knees pressed harder around Ratchet’s thighs in subtle demand.

Megatron’s chassis arched up, rubbing against Ratchet’s, head dipping back in wordless surrender. A small gasp escaped his lips, followed by a groan.

“This is not a night for teasing, medic,” he said.

Ratchet’s denta grazed Megatron’s intake cables. “It is whatever I say it is,” he said.

There was a ripple in Megatron’s field, a tangible sensation of capitulation.

Delicious.

Megatron was right. This, right here, was the easy part.

Kissing Megatron, claiming his mouth more or less, Megatron surrendering beneath him. Ratchet bearing him backward, climbing onto the berth between Megatron’s thighs, rutting against him. Spike against spike, pre-fluid mingling together. The hot snap of Megatron’s valve panel opening, the desperate cant of Megatron’s hips upward, asking without words.

Ratchet growling into the kiss, biting at Megatron’s lips, pinning Megatron’s hands against the berth, parallel to Megatron’s shoulders because he couldn’t reach any higher. Arousal twisting and churning inside of him.

This was a dance familiar to them. This was easy, maybe too easy.

Megatron’s valve, so swollen and slick. Eager as Ratchet’s spike slid over and against it, teasing him the pleasure to come. Ratchet’s own valve, throbbed and ached, desperate to be filled. Perhaps it spoke too much that he wasn’t even sure what he wanted anymore, save that he didn’t want to lose his grip on Megatron’s hands.

Or how pliant Megatron became beneath him. He didn’t give a token tug to Ratchet’s hold. He didn’t try to yank himself free. He relented, more than he resisted, and there was a hunger in his field. Just like the first night Ratchet had tied him up and wrung out more overloads than his frame could tolerate.

His feet drummed against the back of Ratchet's legs. A push nudged Ratchet's spike against his valve, slip-sliding over swollen damp, and Ratchet groaned. He slid into Megatron, his spike swallowed by hot sensation, calipers cycling down in the tightest of squeezes.

He mouthed Megatron's throat, letting cables muffle comments he didn't want Megatron to hear. He tugged on the wild strings of Megatron's field, spinning pleasure into a crescendo. Megatron surged and arched beneath him, not to get free, no. There was no fight in the motion, just need.

This was easy. This was so, so easy.

Ratchet wanted – *needed* – it to stay this easy. So he didn't have to think about it, didn't have to debate it or weigh the realities. He just wanted the pleasure, Megatron hot and pliant beneath him or above him, Megatron yielding without struggle.

Megatron, really.

Ratchet wanted.

And he wished that weren't the hardest thing about it.

Chapter 4

Megatron had Ratchet pinned against the wall, the rinse spattering down over them, solvent swirling down the drain, when his comm chimed.

He tried to ignore it, his mouth otherwise occupied with the hot tangle of Ratchet's glossa. Their fields intertwined, pulsing to the same needy beat. Ratchet's spike pressed hot and rigid against his thigh. Megatron's own left streaks over Ratchet's abdomen.

His hands drifted down to Ratchet's hips, gripping and squeezing. He tensed, with every intention of lifting and plunging deep into Ratchet, sinking into the hot grasp of Ratchet's valve and making the medic overload all over his spike.

His comm chimed again, this time with a command priority override, so that Rodimus' voice spilled into his comm system. Megatron startled and jerked his mouth away from Ratchet's.

"My shift doesn't start for another half hour," Megatron snarled to the impatient brat. He stared at the wall above Ratchet's head, trying to control his ventilations so he didn't sound two thrusts away from overload.

Rodimus sighed into the comm, and Megatron could picture him rolling his optics. "I know that. But Blaster picked up something you're going to want to hear. Unless you want me deciding to answer it all by myself."

Primus below. Who knew what kind of trouble they'd get into if Megatron left Rodimus as the sole-decision-maker. And where the frag was Ultra Magnus? Why wasn't he up there knocking some sense into his former captain current co-captain?

"What is it?" Megatron demanded as Ratchet made a noise and ground against him, his spike skittering hot over Megatron's armor.

"A distress call," Rodimus answered, because he was an utter child and couldn't get to the point fast enough.

Megatron growled. "So?" He stroked a hand down Ratchet's side to try and placate the boiling field of irritation now rolling against him.

"It's pre-war code."

Pre-war. Not Autobot or Decepticon. It could be anyone. It could also be the Knights. It could be the very thing they sought.

It could be Megatron's undoing.

He worked his intake, mouth suddenly dry. "I'll be right there."

Megatron ended the comm before Rodimus could reply with a smart retort. He took a moment to ventilate, before the hot press of a frame against his reminded him that he was in the middle of something.

Ratchet growled, his hands on Megatron's sides, fingers digging between seams to pinch at the cables beneath. "I'm going to kill that flame-painted idiot."

"You can't, we need him," Megatron said with a soft laugh. He smoothed his hands up and down Ratchet's sides, his own ardor cooling, but Ratchet still firm and hungry against him.

"Says you." Ratchet snarled. "I swear to Primus that if you don't finish me off, I'm going to reformat you into a toaster."

Megatron reached behind Ratchet and slammed his palm against the shower, cutting off the spray. "Won't that violate your code of ethics?" he asked, his voice echoing without the noise of the spray to muffle it.

He started to lower himself to a kneel as Ratchet grumped at him, "You're still alive, aren't you? That's the import – ah! – important part."

Ratchet's grumble cut off into a gasp as Megatron licked the head of his spike. It bobbed eagerly at the apex of Ratchet's thighs, the perfect mouthful. Mostly red, with white stripes in thick and thin bands, it was a colorful testament to the energetic and fun youth Ratchet must have been.

Megatron would never admit aloud, but he enjoyed sucking Ratchet off. Ratchet fit perfectly in his mouth, a heavy weight across his glossa, the head of his spike nudging the back of Megatron's intake in a subtle, but powerful sort of claim.

"That-- that'll work," Ratchet gasped out, and his hands found Megatron's head, curving gently around it. His hips rolled forward, gently thrusting his spike into Megatron's mouth.

His field spilled over Megatron's, crackling with need. It filled the small space of the washrack, almost suffocating in its potency. Ratchet was already close, and Megatron could taste that urgency in his field, on his spike.

Megatron hummed around Ratchet and sucked him deeper, letting the entirety of Ratchet's spike fill his mouth. Prefluid trickled down his intake as Ratchet throbbed. He made these bitten off noises, and his grip on Megatron's head tightened.

Megatron curled his hands around Ratchet's aft, urging him to thrust, go deeper, until Megatron's nose brushed against Ratchet's spike housing. He shuttered his optics, soaking in the sensation, working his intake around Ratchet's spike.

Ratchet groaned, curling forward, hips making jerking thrusts. Perhaps he was trying to be careful. The concern was touching.

But they were on a timetable here.

Megatron's intake worked again and again, glossa pressing on the length of Ratchet's spike. He slipped one hand between Ratchet's thighs, fingers seeking up and up, until he found the soaking damp of Ratchet's valve. His thumb nudged firmly over Ratchet's nub, as two fingers slipped inside, curved just right.

Megatron swallowed.

Ratchet clutched at his head and overloaded, spilling in several hot, heavy spurts down the back of

Megatron's intake. He clutched at Megatron's head, holding him in place, forcing Megatron to swallow the spill. His moan muffled against Ratchet's spike, the tug of Ratchet's field trying his self-control. His spike throbbed within the confines of his panel, demanding that it, too, find relief.

If this wasn't important, Megatron was going to fling Rodimus out the cargo bay.

Megatron worked Ratchet carefully as the medic sagged against the wall, panting for ventilations, his hands gentling in their grip. Megatron let Ratchet slip from his mouth and rose. He licked his lips, tasting Ratchet upon them.

"Am I forgiven?" he asked as he swept he squeezed Ratchet's hips, ignoring the urgent throb of his own system.

Dazed blue optics lifted to his. "It's a start," Ratchet managed, unwilling as always to admit when Megatron had impressed him. "What did Rodimus want?"

"We've detected an SOS apparently." Megatron stepped away from Ratchet and grabbed a couple of drying towels, tossing one to the medic. "Judging from the glee in his voice, he thinks it might be related to the Knights." He wiped his fingers clean of lubricant.

Considering they were less than a week out from the coordinates Nautica had found in Quartex, then Rodimus could very well be right. Or they were walking straight into a trap of some kind. One centuries old, but still. You could never be too careful.

"And you want to, what, delay him?" Ratchet asked.

Megatron slanted him a look. "Why would I want that?"

"Finding the Knights does mean you will face judgment." Ratchet shrugged, but there was something tense about it. Far from nonchalant. "Then again, you probably have a plan for that."

Megatron quickly swiped the cloth across his frame, the urgent throb of his spike suddenly as uncomfortable as the lingering flavor of transfluid on his glossa. "If you're so convinced I'm up to no good, what are you even doing here?"

"It's my washrack." Ratchet's drying off was half-sparked at best. He paid as little attention to it as he paid to Megatron.

He pressed his lips together, reminding himself that while Ratchet's glossa was as sharp as Starscream's, he didn't respond to the same kind of discipline. "You know what I meant, medic."

"Yeah, I do. Doesn't mean I want to answer your question." Ratchet balled up the damp towel and tossed it in the vague direction of the laundry drop. He had become quite good at evading Megatron's questions.

And the laundry drop apparently.

Megatron stooped to pick up the towel lump, stuffing both it and his own down the chute. They'd been navigating this tricky territory for several days now, as Ratchet grappled with some internal demon, and Megatron struggled not to hate him for it. He despised this feeling of uncertainty, of not knowing whether Ratchet was going to kiss him or snarl at him.

It would be easier, he knew, to walk away now. To put aside this relationship, if he were being generous, and stop allowing himself to be distracted. Why he couldn't seem to do that, Megatron didn't know.

Why, Ravage asked him, time and time again. Every evening he returned late, or every morning he stumbled inside, just long enough to tidy up before his shift. Why?

Megatron worked his jaw, and decided to let it go for now. They didn't have time to rehash this.

Again.

He moved to the door and noticed Ratchet made no motion to follow him. So Megatron paused in the entry and looked back at the medic, who seemed very occupied with the few spatters of solvent sticking tackily to the floor.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

Ratchet snorted. "I already did, thanks." He finally looked up at Megatron, a twinkle of mischief in his optics. "But you didn't."

"It's nothing but a discomfort. I've had worse." He currently felt worse, what with the pits and empty craters inside his frame.

He wondered if Ratchet ever feared spiking him, only to lose that integral piece of his frame to a wandering black hole.

"I'm sure you have," Ratchet muttered, but he moved to follow Megatron anyway. "Might as well. I don't have anything better to do since I've been banned from working on my days off."

Megatron had won that particular argument. He assumed it would be the only victory he'd be able to celebrate for quite some time.

"If Rodimus is involved, you can be assured it's not going to be boring." Megatron gestured for Ratchet to precede him.

After a long moment of staring at him, searching for something Megatron didn't know, Ratchet took the invitation.

"Boredom isn't what I'm worried about," Ratchet said.

He peered into the hall, checking the corridors for nosy crewmembers before he let Megatron follow him out. They weren't being secretive as a rule, but neither of them wanted to answer uncomfortable questions. Neither did Megatron want anyone to question Ratchet's dedication to their health and safety. Because of course, Ratchet would be considered compromised.

The door locked behind them.

"Frankly, I could use a little boredom," Ratchet added with the edge of a grumble. He looked down at his hands, picking at the palm of one though there was nothing Megatron could see that would cause him irritation.

"Boredom has it's place," Megatron agreed. But boredom and peace were not the same thing.

It wasn't until they walked onto the bridge – together – Megatron realized how much of a bad idea it was. Especially when every optic turned toward them, including Rodimus and Ultra Magnus'. Blaster stood next to them, a datapad in hand, and he looked up, too.

Rodimus' jaw visibly dropped. "Did you two arrive together?" he demanded with a pointed finger their direction.

"No," Megatron replied, and Ratchet echoed him, too much in sync for it to come across as anything but guilty.

Rodimus' optics narrowed. "So it's a coincidence?"

Ratchet growled.

Megatron shoved himself in front of the medic. "You pulled me up here for something important," he reminded the flame-painted menace. "What was it so I can go ahead and tell you it's ridiculous."

Pink flushed across Rodimus' face before his spoiler jerked upward. "Ridiculous?" he echoed and snatched the datapad from Blaster's hands. He stomped across the floor and shoved it against Megatron's chest. "Look at that and tell me who's being ridiculous."

Megatron caught the datapad before it could tumble to the ground. He peered at the screen as Rodimus stepped back, folding his arms with a harrumph. His spoiler arched upward, and he started tapping his feet.

Unfamiliar glyphs scrolled across the screen. Megatron could not read them, but he could recognize a pattern. It was the same statement, repeated over and over. There was a certain cadence to it that reflected a sense of urgency. And it did resemble the type of glyphs around the coordinates they followed.

"See?" Rodimus said.

"I see gibberish," Megatron replied. He looked past Rodimus toward Blaster. "You've translated them?"

Ratchet plucked the datapad out of Megatron's hands, perhaps to see for himself. That he did so without hesitation was more than a little telling.

"Yes, sir." Blaster's weight shifted, his dock fluttering as though fighting back the urge to release his cassettes, not that Megatron believed him to carry any. "Sounds like a distress call to me, though I got Rewind and Nautica and Nightbeat confirming it."

"The coordinates are in our flight path." Ultra Magnus turned to key something into the console, bringing up a holimage of their current route and the location of the distress call.

It would not delay them to investigate it. As far as Megatron could tell, the signal originated from a satellite orbiting a rather large gas planet. The satellite was misshapen, not fully spherical, as though it had taken heavy bombardment, perhaps from space debris.

"It's definitely worth a side trip." Rodimus lifted a hand and waved it about. "I vote that we investigate. And not just because it could give us some clues."

“There may be Cybertronians in need of help,” Ratchet said, his head tilted, but his optics narrowed. “Though judging by these glyphs and their historical significance, I fear whoever issued this SOS is long dead.”

“Or gone,” Megatron said.

“Oh, come *on*,” Rodimus near-whined, leaping from foot to foot and dancing in place. “Aren’t you the least bit curious? Don’t you want to know what they’re doing all the way out here?”

Megatron sighed. He rubbed at the bridge of his nose. Truthfully, whatever they sought in the Hyades Cluster had been there for quite some time. It could wait long enough for them to investigate this broadcast.

Besides, if he tried to argue against it, Rodimus would sulk for months, and they had a hard enough time getting him to do his paperwork as it was. If he started ignoring it again, then Ultra Magnus would sulk, and that was quite enough moping Autobots. Two more than Megatron needed.

“Fine.” He waved toward the holoscreen. “Let’s investigate. At the very least, it may help us on our greater quest.”

“Yes!” Rodimus pumped both fists into the air. “Highbrow, you heard the co-captain. Take us to the satellite and set us in orbit. We’ll take the Rodpod.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” Highbrow sounded amused.

Megatron sighed again. The Rodpod? Seriously? He loathed that thing. He felt quite unsafe in that thing. But like the Pit would he leave Rodimus to explore the signal on his own, with some handpicked crew who would prove to be less than useful.

“Call Perceptor, too. Have him meet us there.” Rodimus spun and started striding off the bridge. He paused by Megatron. “I guess you’re coming too?”

“There must be someone with a level head to keep you on task,” Megatron said. “Especially since Ultra Magnus will remain here so there is at least one command presence on the bridge.”

He couldn’t decide if Ultra Magnus’ sigh was one of relief or disappointment.

“You’ll need a medic,” Ratchet volunteered, and gave Megatron a pointed look. “Even if I’m not on shift.”

Megatron swallowed down a sigh.

This was going to be the exact opposite of his idea of fun.

~

Perceptor piloted despite Rodimus’ insistence he could do it, and Megatron was quite grateful Rodimus seemed to take Perceptor’s quieting glare in stride. It meant the ride was quite smooth, and

Perceptor had the good sense to circle what was clearly a crash site before landing near it.

The ship – the size of a scout ship more or less – had nose-dived into a sandy stretch of empty ground. The aft end stuck out like an unexploded missile, and the stabilizing wings to either side of it had been shorn off in the crash. Other than that, there was no visible damage on the outside to indicate why it had crashed.

It wasn't very promising.

They disembarked and cautiously approached the downed ship. The broadcast for assistance crackled in their comms, until they switched to another channel. There was no atmosphere here, nothing to carry sound. There was very little gravity as well, and as they walked, they disturbed the sediment. It rose up and formed a cloud around their lower halves.

The cargo bay door was only a quarter buried, but still accessible. Perceptor plugged into the system, and even though the ship was centuries old, some things were apparently universal. He managed to get them access.

The air didn't depressurize as the cargo bay door slid open. Which meant it hadn't been pressurized to start with.

The whole group hesitated. Perceptor's scanner flashed a series of nonsense lights at them. "I'm not reading anything that should concern us," he said. "No signs of life either. It seems the Lost Light's sensors were accurate."

"There may not be anyone on board, but there could still be some information we could use," Rodimus decided, squaring his shoulders. He was the first to put his foot on the ramp. "Let's go."

Megatron had to give Rodimus credit. The brat had courage in spades. He might be a work-avoiding, self-interested little Autobot, but he had no problem leaping into the jaws of danger. There was something Decepticon about that.

Rodimus went in first, and Megatron followed, with Ratchet in his wake. Perceptor brought up the rear, sweeping his scanner back and forth. The ramp creaked beneath their footsteps, loud enough to feel the vibrations in their armor. Emergency runners blinked fitfully. As though they had power, but only just.

"There were probably a half-dozen crewmembers," Ratchet commented, his voice crackling through their comms. "A vessel of this size wouldn't have supported more."

"It's scout class," Megatron agreed as he examined the walls, the supports.

"But what were they searching for? Why were they out here?" Perceptor asked, though the question seemed directed at no one in particular. His scanner flashed a series of lights. "If the design holds true to earlier ships, the bridge should be straight down this compartment."

Perceptor was right, of course. But then, he was always right. It had to have been some law of the universe. Megatron once tried to coax Perceptor to the Decepticons. But either he'd laid the wrong bait, or Perceptor was that stridently Autobot. The attempt had failed.

In hindsight, sending Starscream to wheedle Perceptor had not been the best idea. He'd thought, at the time, like would call to like. Scientist to scientist. Or perhaps Starscream had failed on purpose,

disliking the idea of competition when it came to scientific acumen. He'd detested Shockwave.

The Decepticons had suffered several losses due in no small part to the kind of scientific minds the Autobots could call. Shockwave, for example, had always loathed Perceptor. Megatron could see why. Jealousy often bred loathing.

It took the combined might of Perceptor's laser cutter and Megatron's brute strength to force the door to the bridge open. A cloud of silt greeted them, along with an odd, metallic odor. Like human blood, Megatron's processor reminded him. It clogged in his filters, and it took all he had not to cough out the particulate.

"Gross," Rodimus said with a wrinkle of his nose.

Here, the emergency lights were steadier. There was a faint illumination over the captain's chair, front and center. It was occupied by a limp, gray frame. Four other chairs were arrayed in front of it in a semi-circle at what Megatron assumed were several stations, such as navigation and communication. Each chair was occupied.

"No life signs," Perceptor said. He took point at the main console, fingers flicking across keys in an effort to bring up some kind of function.

"No." Ratchet peered at the bulk of the captain's lifeless husk. "Not for some time now."

"What killed them?" Megatron asked.

There was no sign of a struggle. Nothing was destroyed. They weren't in battle formation and had no visible weapons. The filth made it impossible to see blaster marks or energy weapon ash, but that didn't mean there wasn't any.

Perceptor's scanners would probably tell them more.

"I'm not sure," Ratchet said, and there was an odd edge to his voice across the comm. "At first examination, I'd say their sparks burnt out. I'll need to do an autopsy."

"Burnt out?" Rodimus repeated with wide optics. "Our sparks do that?"

"We don't live forever," Megatron said with a snort. "It just seems like we do."

Rodimus scowled at him. "People don't send out distress signals because of old age, Megatron."

"It was caused by something else," Perceptor commented as a holo-monitor fuzzed to life in front of him, words in an ancient Cybertronian language flashing across the screen. "I cannot read this."

"Then maybe Rewind can. We should've brought him in the first place," Rodimus muttered, and he turned away from all of them, switching to a different channel, no doubt to contact Blaster and get Rewind down here.

Ratchet tapped Megatron on the elbow to get his attention. "Help me get these back to my medbay," he said as he lifted one of the smaller corpses into his arms. "The captain's biggest."

Megatron scowled but found himself obeying. Ratchet had a point, and it wasn't like there was anything else he could do here. So he lifted the captain, who was far less stiff than he would have

expected. The largest the captain might be, but he was still small in comparison to Megatron, closer in size to Perceptor.

He followed Ratchet out of the scout ship and back toward the Rodpod, leaving Perceptor at the console and Rodimus peering into every nook and cranny as though he could find a clue hiding there. Megatron doubted it. All of the information would be found in the dead and in the computer.

They docked and departed with their load, as another group of mechs – Rewind included – boarded the Rodpod and headed back down to the ship.

The Lost Light seemed a lot brighter and noisier, after the dim and silence of the depressurized scout cabin. The lingering sense of unease vanished in the brightness however, and Megatron shook off the last of the disquiet.

In the medbay, Ratchet directed Megatron to lay the captain on one slab while he carefully deposited his burden on another. Here, under the bright lights, more features were easier to distinguish. One had a visor, the other a face mask. Megatron couldn't see any signs of an alt-mode. They had strange designs as well, more open seams and gaps in their plating, making it easier to see the cables and such beneath.

"I told the group to bring me back the rest." Ratchet dragged over a wheeled tray full of instruments. He hooked a chair with one foot and tugged it close as well. "Though I suspect they all died of the same thing."

"What makes you say that?"

"There's no trauma." Ratchet bent over the corpse, peering at it, before selecting two tools from his array and getting to work. "Even with the rust and silt, I can tell they weren't attacked. At least, not by conventional weapons. It's like they crashed, for whatever reason, and then just fell into recharge and died."

Megatron's armor prickled. "Should we be worried about viruses or diseases?"

"Mm. I can't think of a single pathogen capable of surviving this long that could infect us." Ratchet wiped at a flat piece of abdominal armor, revealing the slate-gray of deceased paneling beneath. "But then, who knows what they could have picked up out here." He waved vaguely. "I scanned them, if that makes you feel better."

"And?"

"Nothing. Zip, zilch, nada." Ratchet pressed his lips together, brow drawing down in confusion. "Not a drop of energon either, which is the really odd part. I mean, I suppose when they fell asleep and died, it was because they gradually consumed every drop of energon in their frames, but I don't know. It's unusual."

Ratchet sighed and poked around the frame, before lifting up a rusted panel on the mech's arm. It creaked noisily, revealing a medical port. "It's too late now. Suppose we should have done a decontamination rinse at the least. The benefit of hindsight, I guess."

He rummaged around, producing a datapad, and this he plugged into the mech's systems. He tapped at the screen, frown deepening.

“Anything?”

“He’s a dead computer,” Ratchet said and gave Megatron a wry grin. “To put it crudely. I can’t access anything because there’s not a scrap of charge left.” He sighed and patted the deceased mech on the abdomen. “Looks like I’m going to have to do this the hard way, soldier.”

“Which is?”

“Removing his processor and plugging it into an external reader. I only hope our current tech can read his ancient tech.” Ratchet set aside the datapad and brought out a spray bottle and cloth. “But did you notice?” He gestured to the mech as a whole.

Megatron nodded. “No tires, wings, or other identifiable kibble.”

“Yes.” Ratchet gingerly started to wipe at the armor, no doubt looking for marks or badges or something to identify the mech with. “He’s a monoformer. That one is, too.” He gestured to the other mech on a slab. “In fact, I think they all were.”

“Is that significant?”

“I don’t know yet.” Ratchet sighed and tossed the filthy rag into the laundry, grabbing something else instead as he moved around to the mech’s head. “This could take awhile. You probably shouldn’t hang around. People might get ideas.” A magnifying glass snapped out over his optic.

Ideas. The wrong sort of ideas no doubt.

Megatron pushed off the wall and edged toward the door. “Rodimus needs further supervision anyway,” he said, his tone oddly tight. “Should I bother coming by tonight then or would that give people ideas as well?”

Ratchet didn’t even look up from his examination of the corpse, his face distressingly close to the washed out metal. “Don’t ask stupid questions.”

“I’m going to take that as a yes.” Megatron rolled his optics. He lingered, hand rapping a nonsense rhythm on the doorframe. He should leave, but he felt there was something here, something he needed to poke a little harder. “You do understand why I asked, don’t you? You can be... mercurial.”

Ratchet’s head snapped up, magnifying optic flashing oddly in the overhead light. “I am not!”

Megatron only lifted an orbital ridge. That didn’t even dignify a response. They both knew he was right.

Ratchet’s lips pressed together. His head dipped down again, hands carefully lifting out a rusted chip from the mech’s processor and setting it aside, into a cleaning solution.

“First Aid has your energon,” he said.

It was dismissal if Megatron ever heard one. Unfortunately for Ratchet, one he wasn’t inclined to take at the moment. The urge to poke lingered, and Megatron was tired of standing on an edge, wondering if he dared take one step forward, or one step back.

Besides, he had a question, and the privacy of this room was perfect for getting it answered.

Ratchet must have noticed his hesitation, because he rather crankily demanded, “What?”

Megatron worked his jaw before he decided to barge forward. He was many things, but a coward wasn’t one of them.

“Trust,” he said.

“What?” Ratchet repeated himself, his lips curling into a frown, but his hands steady as he plucked free another chip.

Megatron moved away from the door, clasping his hands behind his back. “What we are doing requires trust,” he said. “But you don’t trust me.”

“This is neither the time nor the place--”

“On the contrary,” Megatron interrupted, his spark pounding faster in his chassis. “This is the perfect place, since anyone looking at the camera could assume we are discussing important matters, and it’s the perfect time, because neither you nor I are going anywhere.”

Irritation flickered in Ratchet’s field. “Fine.”

It didn’t feel like a victory, it was too hollow for that, but Megatron barreled forward anyway. “You don’t trust me,” he repeated.

Ratchet audibly vented and set down both scalpel and forceps. “I trust certain things about you. But to say I unequivocally trust you? No, I can’t do that.” He looked up at Megatron, something flat in his optics. “And it should be obvious why.”

“Are my actions not enough?”

“After centuries of war?” Ratchet leaned back in his chair, looking over the poor mech on the table. “A few months of good behavior means nothing in the wake of that.”

Megatron chuffed a vent. “I don’t mean *that*,” he nearly snapped. “Have I not treated you in a manner worthy of trust?”

Ratchet rubbed his hand over his head, looking tired. “I can’t separate the two in my head. It’s not that easy.” One foot scuffed at the floor, his gaze turning distant. “Yes, I trust you’re not going to hurt me. But not all pain is physical.”

Megatron’s optics widened. He wondered if Ratchet realized what he’d just admitted. Perhaps this was not as one-sided as he’d begun to fear.

“If I make you so uneasy, why do you continue this?” Megatron asked.

“I guess I’m just a masochist.” Ratchet’s lips quirked in a self-deprecating grin. He scooted his chair forward, picking up the tools of his trade. “Besides, you can’t say you trust me either.”

Megatron shook his head. “I trust no one to that extent. It’s not personal.”

“Exactly my point. There are different kinds of trust.” Ratchet’s optics cycled wider, for a magnifying effect perhaps. “It’s up to you if what we’re working with is enough.”

Megatron folded his arms, staring hard at the floor. Was it enough? Ratchet trusted Megatron not to hurt him, which was something no one else on this ship could claim. But he’d already proven to be fickle when it came to their relationship.

But he was still the only one Megatron felt he could remotely trust. At least, with this particular need. Despite it all, Megatron *liked* Ratchet.

It would have to be enough.

“I’ve been doing research,” Megatron began haltingly. It went against every instinct to bare himself like this. “There are certain acts which intrigue me.” He let the statement hang, waiting for Ratchet’s reaction.

“I’m listening.”

Megatron hesitated. “Controlled pain is of interest to me,” he admitted. “And I… trust you to apply it appropriately.”

There. He said it.

Ratchet froze, a flake of grit and grime fluttering to the floor. “All right,” he said at length. “What kind of pain?”

“Mild. No visible marks. No carnage. No-- no beating or seemingly random assault.” Megatron’s mouth went dry, a mixture of anxiety for the former scenarios, and intrigue over what possibilities remained.

Ratchet released a contemplative hum, seemingly fully distracted by his autopsy but his reply indicating otherwise. “Whips? Electricity? Flogs?”

“The latter, I think.” Megatron gnawed on his bottom lip. Flogs, he knew, could be a targeted, precise pain. Never incidental, always intentional. Sharp.

His engine gave a little rev.

“Restraints?”

“For your own safety, yes. I may lash out on instinct.” Why did it feel so normal? They were having this strange, intimate conversation – while Ratchet autopsied a centuries dead mech no less – and all discomfort had vanished.

“Just pain then?”

Megatron’s forehead drew down. “I… yes?” He wasn’t sure what Ratchet meant by the question.

Ratchet looked up. “Some mechs like to combine pain with other kinks. Like master/slave playacting or humiliation or punishment.”

“No.” Megatron didn’t even have to think about it. His entire frame tensed at the mere mention of the

three so-called kinks.

“I figured.” Ratchet cycled several ventilations, his expression contemplative. He opened his mouth to say something else, but Megatron’s comm chose that moment to chirp.

He swallowed a growl of aggravation, though it doubled in intensity when he read the ident code. Of course it was Rodimus. Brat had a talent for knowing the best possible moment to interrupt.

Megatron tapped the acceptance key. “Yes?”

Rodimus’ face bubbled into view on his wrist, bright grin and overeager optics. “Yo!” One hand flickered into view with a casual wave. “Ratchet find anything?”

“Nothing yet of use,” Megatron replied.

“Damn. That sucks.” Rodimus’ leaned closer, like they were standing next to each other rather than speaking over a holo-communicator. “It’s a good thing Rewind’s having better luck then. Wanna see what I found?” The last was rather sing-song.

Megatron fought the urge to roll his optics. He refused to stoop to Rodimus’ level. “I’ll be there in a moment.”

He returned his attention to Ratchet, but the medic was now so focused on the corpse, it felt false.

“Don’t forget to get your energon,” Ratchet reminded him.

Conversation over apparently. All because duty – also known as Rodimus – called. Frag it. They were actually making progress, too.

Megatron grimaced at the reminder. “Let me know if you find anything.”

“Will do.”

This time, Megatron left as he claimed he would. He wouldn’t say that his spark felt lighter after the conversation. If anything, he felt even more unsteady, anticipation warring with dread into an obnoxious tangle in his tanks.

Tonight would give him an answer, he knew.

He only had to figure out the right question.

Chapter 5

“You seem to like Turpentine, so we’ll stick with that,” Ratchet said as he circled around Megatron, his pace slow and careful. Predatory.

He held the flog in one hand. The tip of it tapped lightly against the side of his leg. It made a barely audible sound, but he noticed Megatron’s hands clench and unclench to the slow rhythm.

Megatron was large, so Ratchet had him on his knees, a foam mat beneath for his comfort. He wasn’t here to punish Megatron. They were here to explore. He wanted Megatron as comfortable as possible, all else considered.

“Unless you want something else,” Ratchet added.

Megatron shook his head. He was staring at the floor, not meeting Ratchet’s gaze, but his glossa ran over his lips.

“Turpentine will do,” he said. His vents briefly rattled.

“And you will use it,” Ratchet said. He stood behind Megatron, and the tip of the flog touched Megatron’s aft. Not a strike, just a caress.

Nevertheless, a shudder ran across Megatron’s armor in a wave of shiny, gray metal. His engine rumbled, not with distress at least.

“I will use it,” Megatron said. His hands curled again.

His wrists were bound. They lay in his lap, fingers tangled together. Ratchet finally found a use for the magnacuffs. A small chain connected the cuffs to a metal loop Ratchet had welded into the floor. It wasn’t strong enough to restrain an actual prisoner. It would only stop Megatron from swinging at Ratchet in a blind panic. The tug was a reminder.

“I believe you.” Ratchet paced around Megatron again, tapping the flog against his side. His field slipped out, tasting Megatron’s.

There was anticipation there. A hot, thready line of arousal beneath. A wisp of anxiety, too. That came as no surprise. Trying a new kink for the first time always came with a special brand of disquiet.

“I am going to ask you a question, and you will answer honestly,” Ratchet said. He reached out with the flog, gliding the tip of it gently along Megatron’s armor, letting him feel sensation, like a tickle.

Megatron shivered. “Yes.”

Not even a fight, an argument, a sarcastic retort. Just agreement.

Primus, he was good at this.

Ratchet moved behind Megatron, stroking the tip of the flog up and down Megatron’s spinal strut, a light touch was sure to excite each and every node on his sensory net. Priming him, so to speak, for

the harsher strikes to come.

“I will strike your back,” Ratchet said, keeping his tone to a careful cadence, one Megatron seemed to track. “I will strike your aft. Your thighs. Is there any part you wish for me to avoid?”

Megatron ventilated, the sound of it off-rhythm and shuddering. “No.”

“You’re sure?” Ratchet lightly dragged the tip of the flog over Megatron’s back, down his spinal strut, to his hips and then over his aft. “If you change your mind, you know what to say.”

“Turpentine,” Megatron breathed, and his armor flexed, seams lengthening, giving Ratchet peeks at the cables beneath, and the charge crawling through them. Heat puffed off Megatron in growing waves.

“That’s right.”

Ratchet rested the flog against Megatron’s aft, the flat of it measured against an armor plate.

“Hold still.”

A low sound rose out of Megatron’s intake. Not quite a whimper, nor a moan, it still fed arousal into Ratchet’s systems. Made him lick his lips as heat flushed his lines.

He tightened his grip on the flog, making the supple, organic material whisper a creak. And then he flicked his hand back and struck.

Schwhip!

The flog snapped against Megatron’s armor, sharp and quick, the blow meant more to startle than hurt. Megatron jerked, but otherwise made no noise.

Ratchet patiently waited, dragging the tip of the flog up and down Megatron’s back. Part of the play was in the anticipation, in letting the sub imagine when the next blow would come.

The warm up was the easiest. Ratchet fell into a rhythm, a pattern, light strikes up and down Megatron’s back and aft and thighs. He knew they didn’t hurt. He’d measured his strength on purpose. It was all meant to sensitize.

Megatron started moving in place, rocking on his knees, arching into each blow. His ventilations quickened. His field stuttered and sang, reaching out for Ratchet. Otherwise, he didn’t make a sound.

At least, not until Ratchet’s next strike crossed over three others, firmer than before. A noise squeaked out of Megatron’s intake. He sucked air through his denta.

Ratchet paused, listening, waiting for a request to wait, to stop, for the one word that would have him throw the flog aside.

“Don’t,” Megatron said, ventilations haggard, his shoulders drifting down, armor seams gaping even further. “Don’t stop.”

Ratchet teased Megatron with his field, dragging swirls of it along Megatron’s armor, leaving heat in

its wake. “Be still,” he repeated.

He struck again.

And again.

Crisscrossing his earlier marks. Harder strikes over areas of armor he had yet to touch. Lighter taps against those bared cables, enough to make Megatron jerk and audibly moan, for the chains to rattle, for him to surge back toward Ratchet in silent request. There was a click and the scent of lubricant filled the air.

Ratchet need only look, to see Megatron’s valve had bared itself. But not, curiously, his spike. He imagined Megatron was swollen, folds dripping, nodes blinking to the same tune as his biolights, desperate for a touch.

He swung, the flog snapping against Megatron’s aft, square in the center of three other marks, and Megatron’s backstrut arched. He groaned, long and low, charge crawling over his armor. His field burst with hunger, with pain and pleasure mixed, and the air throbbed with it.

Ratchet swallowed thickly, his ventilations quickening. “More?” he asked as he lightly tapped the flog over every bared seam, little flicks that barely qualified as pain.

He heard nothing but the rasp of Megatron’s ventilations. The creak of his armor.

“Megatron?”

Worry crept in. He hadn’t got a response, and Megatron had hunched inward, dragging in gasping breaths from his mouth. His field still rang, hot and heavy with need, and lubricant pooled beneath his aft.

Ratchet leaned closer. “Megatron?” he repeated, a bit more firmly this time, and then he rested his free hand between Megatron’s shoulders, and against the base of Megatron’s neck.

He meant to calm, to ground Megatron with the gentle touch. He was unprepared for the way Megatron abruptly snapped upright, his wrists tugging harsh on the chain and snapping it free of the loop in an instant. His optics went coal-fire crimson, and a sound, a guttural, terrifying sound yanked out of his intake.

Ratchet hurriedly danced back, fearing a wild swing. Megatron’s field lashed out, but he did not. Terror and panic sliced razor-sharp through the air. Megatron tucked his wrists against his abdomen; he sucked air through his denta. He panted as though he’d been sent through a wringer, and then he spoke, and Ratchet almost couldn’t believe his audials.

“Turpentine,” he whispered, with the air of someone who’d been defeated.

Ratchet’s spark ached at the sight. He tossed the flog away, pointedly making it clatter as it struck the cabinet door. He wanted Megatron to audibly understand Ratchet had set it aside before he perceived it as a weapon.

“It’s okay,” Ratchet said, careful to keep his voice low. He crept around until he stood in front of Megatron, keeping his hands in view. “The flog is gone.”

Megatron drew in a deep, heavy breath. His armor clamped so tightly, Ratchet feared he'd overheat. "It was not... the flog," he admitted, and his optics shuttered, his face turning away from Ratchet as if ashamed.

"All right." Ratchet slipped to his knees, inching closer. "Do you want me to take off the cuffs?"

"It wasn't them either." But Megatron offered his wrists, and Ratchet removed the cuffs, tossing them far away as well.

Ratchet rested his hands over Megatron's, pulling them close so he could examine Megatron's wrists for damage. There was some minor scratching to his paint, but nothing that wouldn't be gone soon.

"My neck," Megatron said after a moment, and his shoulders hunched further. It had the effect of making him seem smaller, fragile. "You asked me if I had any hard stops, and I must insist from now on, that you don't touch my neck."

"Done."

Megatron looked up at him, and suddenly, he looked centuries younger. There was surprise in his face, and vulnerability, too. "That easily?"

"Of course." Ratchet inched closer, until their knees touched. He was too old to be on the floor like this, but the taste of that terror in Megatron's field still had his own spark pounding in his chassis. "Trust and respect, remember?"

Megatron stared at him, seeing without seeing. A shiver started up in his armor, barely loosening the plates from their tight clamp.

"You don't even have to tell me why. That's not important. Unless you want to talk about it, I mean." Though Ratchet had his suspicions, given what Chromedome had told him about Megatron's reaction when Optimus offered his services. "I respect your boundary. You trust that I'll keep it."

"I see." Megatron's lips curved downward, not quite a frown, more an expression of someone who found a concept difficult to understand.

Ratchet stroked Megatron's wrists. "Just your neck?" he prompted. "Was there anything else I should avoid in the future?"

Megatron shook his head. "I... enjoyed the pain," he admitted and his gaze slunk away, shame bleeding into the edges of a field already choppy with other emotions. "Until that point, to clarify."

"Are you sure? There was a moment you were unresponsive." Ratchet squeezed Megatron's wrists and tucked his hands back against his lap. He rose, keeping his movements slow and careful. "I'm just going to check the marks on your back."

"It was intense. Surprisingly so," Megatron said. "I was unprepared for the conflict in my dermal net, where I recognized I was receiving pain, but it kept turning into liquid splashes of pleasure through my sensory lines."

The honesty was refreshing, Ratchet had to admit. He continued to telegraph his movements as he moved behind Megatron, examining the welts and marks in Megatron's armor. Nothing had cut deeply. There were a few inflamed areas, but a night of recharge should soothe those over.

It was a textbook flogging. Ratchet hadn't lost his touch.

"I would not be averse to experiencing it again," Megatron added. "Only without the panic."

"I will not touch your neck like that again," Ratchet promised. He rested his hands gently on Megatron's shoulders, closer to his arms than his clavicle. "Come on. Let's get you up and into the berth."

Confusion fluttered in Megatron's field. "We're done? But I thought--"

"Sometimes, partners can continue after a safe word has been spoken. It depends on the circumstances. I don't think it's a good idea right now," Ratchet said. "You might disagree, but you're not the only one who gets to say 'no'."

Megatron shook his head and slowly, like he had to remember how to work his limbs, climbed to his feet. He wavered unsteadily, and Ratchet gripped his elbow to keep him upright.

"I don't disagree."

"Good." Ratchet carefully pulled Megatron to the berth and helped him climb on top of it.

Megatron's limbs didn't seem to want to obey him, which wasn't uncommon when a session like that was disrupted in such a way. No doubt Megatron's synapses were still operating in a state of confusion. He flopped onto the berth, onto his belly – protecting his spark, Ratchet noticed. He took an obnoxious amount of space as he usually did.

Ratchet shifted away, intending to grab a few things, but Megatron's hand snapped out, fingers coiling around his wrist. "Where are you going?" he asked, and he might have meant it as a demand, but it came out plaintive instead.

Ratchet cursed himself. He should have known better.

"Nowhere." He modulated his vocals to be soothing.

The mess could keep. He'd tidy in the morning. The lights could be dimmed remotely, and it wouldn't hurt the flog or cuffs to sit on the ground. If anyone barged in and got an opticful, they deserved it.

Ratchet climbed onto the berth, though he was far too keyed up to recharge now, and quickly found himself with a blanket of former warlord. Megatron tucked himself up against Ratchet's side, pillowing his head on Ratchet's chassis, slinging a leg over Ratchet's. Trapping him in place.

Ratchet froze. This was... well, this was quite intimate. Normally, when they ended up sharing a berth, it was in whatever exhausted position they flopped into after a night of endless fragging. Or they lay back to back as though they were two soldiers guarding one another in a foxhole.

"I have shift in the morning," Megatron murmured against his chassis, ex-vents leaving a brief fog over Ratchet's windshield.

"I'll wake you," Ratchet promised. His free arm – the other was trapped beneath Megatron's bulk – curved over Megatron's chassis. He stroked gray plating, and felt Megatron relax beneath his touch.

His field clung to Ratchet's like a limpet's, however, and seemed determined to match him, pulse for pulse, as if Megatron found solid ground in Ratchet. Megatron vented out, his hand hooked on Ratchet's side.

Ratchet kept petting him, his thoughts a whirl. That had not gone as he'd expected. He'd assumed Megatron would treat tonight's session like he had all the others – with a certain measure of condescension. Instead, he'd fully surrendered to it, and then, used his safe word.

That was probably what had surprised Ratchet the most.

Now he had a vulnerable murderous warlord cuddling him for comfort, and Ratchet's spark was doing queer things in his chassis. Things like affection which had no place here in a relationship that wasn't.

Megatron trusted him to abide by the safe word. Megatron *trusted* he wouldn't overstep this important boundary in the future.

Megatron trusted *him*.

Guilt clawed out of the pit of Ratchet's tank and settled in his spark, pulsing ice through his lines. It took effort to keep it out of his field so Megatron wouldn't detect it.

He'd lectured Megatron over and over about the importance of trust, and here he was, lying to Megatron. A lie by omission perhaps, but still a lie. He let Megatron believe the fool's energon kept him weak and pliant. He fed the foul mixture to Megatron every day. He lied, over and over, and he'd have to continue to lie.

Optimus' orders were absolute, no matter how Ratchet disagreed with them. Optimus was right. Megatron was a threat. Megatron was dangerous. But perhaps he was sincere about changing. This was his opportunity to do so.

How would he react to know the fool's energon was a farce?

How could Ratchet be such a hypocrite?

But he couldn't tell Megatron the truth. Not without both defying Optimus and potentially putting the crew's life in jeopardy.

He couldn't keep lying either. Not to someone who shared his berth. Especially not to someone he was now engaging in domination and submission play with. It was a matter of trust. Megatron trusted him, and Ratchet betrayed that trust every time he handed over a cube of Fool's Energon.

More than that, how could he in good conscience, continue a relationship with a mech he was required to lie to? How could he be with someone he didn't trust in turn? Ratchet wanted to believe in Megatron, but the rational side of him was certain Megatron's motivations were suspect, and his presence on the Lost Light was all part of some larger plan.

It was a moral quandary of the worst sort.

It meant Ratchet had to make a decision. He wasn't sure where to even start. He needed an outside opinion. Someone else's advice.

There was only one person on the ship he trusted to be discreet.

It would have to be Rung.

~

Megatron was gone when Ratchet awoke in the morning. He wasn't sure which was more surprising, that Megatron had crept out or Ratchet hadn't even noticed. Then again, he'd said he had a morning shift, so perhaps it wasn't embarrassment or shame that had him pulling a disappearing act.

Ratchet leveraged himself out of the berth feeling the years and the mileage on his creaking frame. He downed both coolant and energon in equal measures. He had to be on shift soon, too, but he had enough time to visit Rung, if Rung had time for him anyway.

He did.

"Ratchet, what a pleasant surprise," Rung said as he gestured for Ratchet to come inside.

Coming to visit Rung was always like coming home. Rung's field was full of warm acceptance, and it greeted Ratchet's with a bump of affection. There was nothing angry about Rung, nothing difficult. He was uncomplicated, and he was one of Ratchet's oldest friends, especially to have survived the war.

"Though I take it this isn't a social call?"

Ratchet grunted. "No, but I really should do that more often." He slung his arm over Rung's shoulders and tugged the small therapist into a side-embrace. "Though from what I hear, you don't want for visitors."

Rung's field blushed like a coy untouched, but Ratchet knew good and well there was fire and steel beneath it. "I have my fair share," he said as he returned the embrace. "Though I hear rumor you do as well."

"I should have known I couldn't keep a secret from you." Ratchet dropped down into the patient couch, his backstrut aching. He sprawled his arms across the back of it, tipping his head to look at the ceiling. "I need advice."

"So I gathered." Rung sat behind his desk and placed his elbows on top, lacing his fingers together. "Of a personal sort then. You've taken a rather controversial lover, I hear."

Ratchet snorted. "Controversial," he repeated. "That's a delicate way of putting it." He shuttered his optics and cycled a loud, full vent. "I am in over my head, Rung."

"It happens to the best of us. What can I do for you, Ratchet?" Rung, at least, didn't seem to judge Ratchet for his poor decision-making when it came to interface partners.

He should have just taken Bluestreak up on the offer the sniper made when he first came onto the

ship. But like didn't necessarily call to like, and Ratchet knew he and Blue would end up where they'd always been – grating against each other, one dom to another. He adored Bluestreak, he truly did. But it wasn't a relationship that could last longer than an intermittent night or two.

"I need you to tell me the truth." Ratchet palmed his face. "The truth I don't want to hear."

"All right." He heard Rung cycle a long ventilation, felt the gentle wave of his field. "If you want to continue as you are, you have to tell Megatron the truth."

Damn it.

"I can't do that!" Ratchet snapped and jerked upright, directing a glare at one of his oldest friends. "I have orders."

"We're no longer at war, Ratchet. Your orders are whatever you accept them to be." Rung's voice was quiet, but there was chastisement in it. He leaned back, removing his glasses to clean them. It was an action that appeared nonchalant, but Ratchet knew better.

"But that's not what has you drowning in guilt, is it?"

Ratchet chewed on the inside of his cheek. "Controversial," he said, and it was with a ragged ventilation. "The moment I realize something deeper is growing, I realize exactly who I've invited into my berth."

"And you think it's a betrayal."

"How can it not be?" Ratchet rocketed to his feet and started to pace, his spark whirling and churning in his chamber. "This would be the time most people say 'I've lost count of how many mechs died' but I haven't! I can tell you their names, all the Autobots who died in my medbay because of Megatron's war. How am I not betraying their memory?"

"That is the question, isn't it?" Rung's tone was mild. "Do you feel Megatron is insincere?"

It was the very same question he had asked himself before.

Ratchet rubbed at his forehead with two fingers. "I don't know."

"Then ask yourself this: if he were sincere, would it still feel like a betrayal?"

Ratchet skidded to a halt, his heels clicking together. "No," he admitted, and vented a sigh. "And yes."

Wanting to change now didn't excuse his behavior in the past. Working to create a better future was a good start, so long as he was sincere. If Megatron was sincere, then yes, some of the guilt would ease. Ratchet would find it a lot easier to forgive himself. Maybe he wouldn't dream about the dead haunting him.

He could point out, 'look, wars aren't won by victory, but by forgiveness after defeat'. It was all well and good to say the Decepticons were defeated, but if nothing changed, they'd eventually end up back where they were. And Ratchet was *tired*.

None of that mattered, however, because Ratchet couldn't be certain of Megatron's motivations. He

could ask, but he couldn't trust the answer he'd get. He wanted to. Oh, it would be so much simpler if he could take everything Megatron said and did at face value.

He had centuries of war behind him as proof that with Megatron, nothing was ever as it seemed.

"Do you think his feelings for you are sincere?" Rung asked, the soft query somehow feeling like a punch to the abdomen, for all the reality it delivered.

Ratchet hadn't even considered that. He'd been so consumed by whether or not Megatron was going to betray the Autobots and the Lost Light, he'd not spared a thought as to whether or not Megatron would betray *him*.

Realization poured over him like a spray of liquid nitrogen. He'd never considered that a concern. In the long run, Ratchet was worthless to any plan Megatron might have. He'd never betray Optimus, he wasn't a bargaining chip, and he wouldn't join the Decepticons for any reason. There was no logical ground for Megatron to begin a relationship with Ratchet save for the obvious one.

He wanted to.

And Ratchet, frag himself to the Pit and back, wanted Megatron, too. He even trusted the former warlord and mass murderer's feelings for him. He believed Megatron was sincere about that much.

It floored him.

It made him sway, dizzily, and Ratchet had to catch himself.

"Ratchet?" Rung sounded worried. There was a hiss of ancient hydraulics as he rose, perhaps intending to circle around the desk.

"It never occurred to me to think otherwise," Ratchet said, barely above a whisper. He looked up at one of his oldest, dearest friends. "He's with me because he wants to be. And I'm with him..."

"Because you want to be," Rung finished for him, the smallest of smiles on his lips. Tension eased out of his frame, the concern in his field stroking gently over Ratchet's, soothing him.

Ratchet dragged a hand down his face. "That... it's just... it only makes the decision harder."

"Does it?"

Ratchet's shoulders sagged. He dropped his hands. "No." He slumped back into the couch, head tipping back.

Rung circled around the desk and sat next to him, resting a hand on his thigh. "You already know what you need to do."

Sadly, he did.

Ratchet curled an arm over Rung's shoulders, tucking the therapist against him. "Why couldn't I have fallen for you?" he sighed, a purely rhetorical question, of course.

Rung chuckled and patted him on the thigh. "Because I'm not the kind of challenge you need."

“Would be easier if you were,” he muttered, and let himself soak in Rung’s stabilizing field. A thought occurred to him. “Though you know, Bluestreak--”

“Hush you little matchmaking busybody. I’m perfectly capable of finding a berthmate on my own.” Rung sounded amused at least. “Besides, he was my patient for far too long.”

“Just saying.” Ratchet grinned and shuttered his optics, drawing on Rung’s field to give him the courage he needed, to do what he had to do.

It was why he’d come here. He trusted Rung to give him the honest answers, even if he didn’t want to hear them.

It was a hard choice, but Ratchet had long been familiar with hard choices.

This part or that part. This injury or that injury. Save the flickering spark, or fix the broken leg so the mech could rejoin the battle. Both of them dying, in the end, because it was war – brutal and bloody and unforgiving.

Ratchet sighed and hid behind his palm.

Curse his conscience.

Chapter 6

Rewind had indeed come through for them.

Megatron stood on the bridge, scrolling through the dozens of coordinates on a datapad, only half of which they'd matched to legitimate locations. They were spread all across the universe, some within a few weeks travel, others requiring quantum leaps of such energy, they couldn't possibly make it.

They were, of course, heading for the one shining bright and true in the middle of the Hyades Cluster. But the others held promise as well. Possible locations where the Knights of Cybertron, or at least their associates, could be found.

The scout ship had been a gold mine of information.

They'd destroyed it as a matter of course. Once they finished stripping the computers of all relevant data, and removing the crew to the Lost Light – they'd found a fifth member in a recharge berth in the crew quarters. Megatron was of the mind they didn't leave anything behind for potential enemies to find.

Fortunately, Ultra Magnus agreed.

They let Whirl pull the trigger, the heli obnoxiously happy as he took aim and fired, obliterating the small ship in a matter of seconds.

The deceased Cybertronians were currently in storage in the medbay. Ratchet had finished his autopsies, but found nothing to indicate their cause of death. He'd determined they died due to complete energon loss, but wasn't sure what had caused the energon loss.

Unanswered questions made Megatron uncomfortable. Especially when Rewind discovered the point of origin of the scout ship matched the very same coordinates from their original course.

Whatever waited for them in the Hyades Cluster had possibly contributed to the death of the scouts. Megatron was all for waiting until they had more information. Rodimus thought it best they confront, possibly destroy, a potential threat.

Megatron had, once again, been outvoted.

He ground his denta and swept his finger across the screen, saving the data. He downloaded it to his personal datapad just as Ultra Magnus strode onto the bridge, precisely on time. If it had been Rodimus, he'd have strolled in as late as he wished.

Thank Primus for small favors.

"Good afternoon, Megatron," Ultra Magnus greeted with a tip of his massive head. Though 'afternoon' was relative, given their thirty-six hour days and lack of rising or setting sun to mark the passage of time. "All's well, I presume?"

Megatron tucked his datapad under his arm. "You presume correctly. We hold steady to our course and are set to arrive within several day's time per previous estimates."

Ultra Magnus stepped up to the command console, logging himself in and logging Megatron out. “Is there anything you wish me to handle while I’m on shift, Captain?”

His professionalism was so refreshing, even if it did border on obsessive. Often, Ultra Magnus reminded Megatron of Soundwave, who he could always count on to be capable and responsible. His most reliable officer, truth be told.

“Nothing of immediate concern.” Megatron glanced around the bridge, ensuring he hadn’t missed anything, before he dipped his head. “Have a good shift, Magnus.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Megatron left, at first intending to head to the library, but adjusting his course to return to his quarters instead. Research in the onboard library had proven fruitless. Why bother wasting time there?

It was quiet.

There were no groups of mechs playing irresponsible games in the halls. Nor were there trios of inebriated singers wobbling way back to their habsuites. Something rattled in the vents. Perhaps Skids. Perhaps a rodent hitchhiker.

The Lost Light hummed around him, steady onward to its destination.

Ratchet was currently on shift in the medbay. Megatron knew this because he’d checked. Not because as captain he ought to know who was available, but because he’d wanted to see if Ratchet was free. He wasn’t quite sure why.

Embarrassment lingered around the edges. He’d used his safe word last night. It had been too much for him. The flare of unease sharply bursting into panic at the mere touch of Ratchet’s hand to the back of his neck. The memory of needles defiling him, Trepan grinning over him, triumphant and sinister.

Megatron felt he should have been stronger. But there had been no pity in Ratchet’s optics, no mockery in his field. He’d stopped because Megatron told him to, and he pushed for nothing more. It had sent Megatron’s spark into a roil of emotion.

Megatron was not a mech experienced with the concept of trust. That he should offer any to Ratchet left him unsteady.

He keyed himself into his habsuite, absently noticing the distinct lack of offensive graffiti this time around, and slipped into the dim. He paused, as he always did, sweeping inside with several sensors first. One could never be too careful on a ship full of Autobots.

Ravage slunked out from beneath the berth, jaw cracking open in a yawn. He had to have picked that up from the Autobots.

“Enjoy your field trip?” Ravage asked with a languid stretch of his backstrut that should not have been possible.

“Did you?” Megatron asked. He hadn’t seen Ravage sneak aboard the Rodpod and join them in creeping around the scout ship.

However, he was quite certain Ravage had been there. Curiosity was one of Ravage's strongest traits. He never seemed to lose that need to seek out all information, though he had no one to report it to anymore.

"It was productive," Ravage answered. His toothy smirk said it all.

Megatron unloaded his compartments into his cabinet, though he kept a datapad on hand. "Anything I might find useful?"

Another long, languorous stretch where Ravage extended his talons, and withdrew them. "That depends." He sat back on his haunches, tail flicking.

Megatron closed the cabinet, locking it. "On?"

Ravage's optics narrowed into small slits. "You're losing your grip, Megatron."

He touched his Autobrand, but he suspected that wasn't what Ravage meant. "You're referring to Ratchet." Megatron sat on the edge of the berth, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on his knees.

"He's Prime's amica," Ravage reminded him, as if Megatron had forgotten that small detail. Which, admittedly, he had. "He's the Autobot CMO. He's the worst choice on this ship to try and manipulate."

Megatron frowned. "I don't intend to manipulate him. It's not a game."

Ravage tilted his head, audials flicking back. "Isn't it?"

Megatron clasped his hands together, fingers interlacing. "I am many things, but I've never used romance as a weapon. Or friendship for that matter."

"Tell that to Soundwave."

Megatron's optics and his tone flattened. "What?"

Ravage rose, pacing back and forth. "You abandoned him."

Anger flared in his field. "Soundwave abandoned me," Megatron snapped. He jerked off the berth, feet hitting the floor with a loud stomp. "His trust in me should have been absolute. He should have *understood*. He was the one mech who should've seen the truth in my spark. He--"

Megatron cut off as Ravage's ears flattened, and he curled closer to the floor. It wasn't fear in his optics, but only just. There was wariness. Perhaps a touch of disdain, too.

Megatron vented, his hands forming fists. He stepped back against the berth, cycling several ventilations.

Silence descended.

Ravage crept to the door, standing in front of it. He returned Megatron's gaze evenly.

"He is only behaving true to his spark," Ravage said. "We lost the war, Lord Megatron. And when

we looked to you for guidance, you became an Autobot. It is you who betrayed him.”

Megatron flinched. Cold sank through his frame, every word hitting like a blaster shot. Worse that Ravage wasn’t completely wrong.

“I am not an Autobot,” Megatron said, softening his voice. “When a world is divided into either and or, if you cannot be one, you must be the other. That is the choice I had to make.”

“If it’s the lie you tell yourself to recharge, it’s no concern of mine.” Ravage rose up on his hindlegs and keyed the door open. It slid aside, and he paused. “But remember, just as you chose to abandon your badge as the lesser of two evils, Soundwave chose to cling to his. And none of us are any better than we were before.”

Ravage stalked out, silent and nigh invisible, the door sliding shut behind him. Getting in the last word, just like his carrier and dear friend. Megatron should not be surprised.

He perched on the edge of the berth. Ravage’s words circled around and around in his processor.

It was not a lie, he seethed. It was the truth.

He’d faced a decision then. He’d looked back on the destruction he’d wrought, and realized that for all he’d done, while yes there was freedom of a sort, they were all still caged, only the bars were made of violence rather than tyranny. There was so much anger, so much hate, so much that would keep them on the path to their doom. They were a dying species. If they continued, they would find their end.

Megatron had taken the Autobrand only because he couldn’t wear the Decepticon brand anymore. It filled him with too much shame. If there was any hope of recovery, of obtaining what they actually sought in the first place, it was without brands entirely.

But becoming a NAIL absolutely wasn’t an option. So Megatron had done the only thing he could. He’d taken the Autobrand for his own. He’d hoped his Decepticons would understand. He’d hoped Soundwave would see the truth in his spark.

Instead, he’d taken this journey alone.

It was fine. It was absolutely fine. Megatron had begun alone, in the dark and the silence, beaten down by rage and violence. He would continue the fight the best way he knew how, even it meant he faced ridicule for it. And he would, as he always did, have a back up plan.

Just in case.

The Decepticons as they were remained Megatron’s pride and joy.

What they had become, however, brought him shame. He’d led them down that path. He still believed much of his earlier actions were necessary. But there was a point when he could have stopped, when he could have let reason lead the way, rather than anger and resentment.

He could have taken Orion Pax’s hand.

Megatron sighed and swept a hand over his head. He slumped onto his berth, the weight of years hanging over his frame like a drapery made of stone. He was tired. He felt he could lay down and

recharge forever, and not just because of the Fool's Energon stealing his energy. He was old, he was falling apart, and there were more dimensional holes inside of him than firmness.

Was it too much to ask for a little peace?

He lay back, folding his arms behind his head. This was his leisure time. He could be doing all manner of things. Nothing appealed at the moment.

Ratchet was on shift, and Megatron still felt off balance from their last encounter. He hadn't expected to enjoy the pain so much. He hadn't expected to enjoy it at all.

Now he found himself craving it. There was something in the surrender, something in the way he handed himself over, like a burden left behind. It was intoxicating.

He wondered, too, if he could turn his guilt toward that surrender. If he could offer up his pain as a sacrifice, a recompense. Perhaps it would work. Perhaps not.

Exhaustion tugged at Megatron's frame. His processor ached. He felt wrung dry, like the corpses they'd found in the crashed ship. Energy seeped out of him. The rigid berth felt as comfortable as a cloud beneath him.

He slipped into recharge without intending to do so.

Megatron's door chimed.

In itself, this was an odd occurrence. No one came to visit him. Not Ultra Magnus with official business. Not Rodimus to be a bother. Not Whirl or any other Autobot to pick a fight. No one. If Ravage wanted to enter, he could let himself in. There was no reason anyone should be buzzing his door.

The oddity stirred him out of recharge. Had him sluggishly stumbling toward the door, palming it open, rubbing grit from the corner of his optic with the other hand. He had no idea who it would be.

Funny how Ratchet hadn't factored into his list of potential visitors. They always met at the medic's suite, on his terms, because Megatron was more than aware of his position, and Ratchet never seemed to notice or be bothered by the fact their trysts never occurred in Megatron's suite.

"Ratchet?"

"Did I wake you?" the medic asked. One optical ridge arched.

Megatron supposed it was technically the middle of the Lost Light's day block. It was an odd time for anyone to be recharging.

He peered at Ratchet, who was grinning, but it didn't reach his optics. Something wasn't quite right. "I thought you were on shift."

"Here's the thing, eventually, those shifts end." Ratchet rose a little and glanced over his shoulder. "So are you going to let me in or do you want to talk out here?"

Talk. That was never a good sign.

Megatron stepped aside. He ignored the queer sensation of feeling like his territory was being intruded upon. There was an odd sense of vulnerability in allowing Ratchet inside, like he'd allowed the medic see a part of himself he wasn't sure he wanted Ratchet to see.

The door closed. The air between them felt ten times thicker.

"Talk," Megatron repeated. "About what?"

"Us." Ratchet turned in a slow circle, giving a perfunctory scan of the room.

Megatron frowned. "I was under the impression we did not qualify as an 'us'."

"We're some definition of it, that's for sure, otherwise I imagined all those times I had you in my berth." Ratchet faced Megatron, still as twitchy as he'd been standing outside the door. "Anyway, definitions don't matter anymore, because I'm calling an end to it."

Megatron cycled his optics. "I don't understand."

Ratchet scowled. "It's not a difficult concept, Megatron. We're over."

He kept using words like 'we' and 'us' when he'd been fighting a definition for their relationship the entire time. Megatron couldn't fathom why he was only choosing now to acknowledge it.

"End. Over." Megatron tasted the words. Both were foul, unpleasant things. "Interesting that you should use those words when there was never an 'us' and the 'we' that didn't exist, never had a beginning."

Ratchet folded his arms over his chest. "If you're trying to guilt me into changing my mind, it's not going to work."

"No, you seem very set in this decision." Megatron crossed his arms as well, his armor slicking tight to his frame. "Can I ask why or is that too much like a real relationship for your comfort?"

Ratchet's weight shifted, plating reshuffling around his protoform as though he couldn't decide where it should sit. "Does it matter? It's not going to change anything."

"Yes," Megatron replied, alarmed by the amount of hurt echoing through his spark. "It matters to me."

Something flickered across Ratchet's face and in his field, too quick for Megatron to grasp. "Look," he said with a sigh. "I just... the truth is, I can't trust you. And that means I can't trust myself."

Megatron's denta gritted. "You're just now deciding this? What changed?"

"Nothing." Ratchet shook his head, his hands dropping to his sides. "I've always wondered when you were going to betray us."

It hurt, far more than it should have. "Us as in the you and me that doesn't exist or the Autobots at large?"

"Both. Either." Ratchet rubbed at his forehead, suddenly looking every bit as old as he was. The dermal layer of his face wrinkled as he closed his optics. "Look. Like I said, it doesn't matter. I've

made my decision. This is what I have to do.”

Megatron worked his intake. “Clearly.”

Ratchet glared at him, optics sharp and icy. “Don’t act like you didn’t know this was coming. We started as a mess, it shouldn’t be a surprise we’re ending as one, too.”

“And if I were to call you a coward, would that emerge as a surprise?” Megatron bit out. His dentaground together, his jaw aching.

“Cowardice and having a set of moral principles are not the same thing,” Ratchet hissed. His hands formed fists at his side.

“Ah, so now it’s a morality issue.” Megatron nodded in the way mechs often did when they didn’t actually agree. “But of course. How could I be so blind? You’ve reached the quota of behaviors to activate your sanctified Autobot guilt codex. Now that you’ve had your taste of pleasure, it’s time to bow and confess, is that it?”

Trust, Ratchet had spouted so often. Respect, he’d even claimed. And yet the truth was, here he stood, saying how he was too good to stoop to the lowly level of being with Megatron. Because he had *morals*. And *principles*.

Funny how those didn’t stop him at all in the past six months.

“Don’t put words in my mouth!” Ratchet demanded, his voice raised, much louder than Megatron’s had been. He took a step forward, but his field was a thing of leashed violence. “Someone like you, who did his level best to destroy our entire world because it didn’t bow to your demands, can’t begin to understand it.”

Megatron’s back hit the wall before he realized he’d begun to retreat, and he hated himself for that, for the weakness. He was Megatron; he did not withdraw. And yet.

And yet.

In the face of an angry medic/lover/Autobot, his back was against the wall, fury swirling with hurt, the desire to lash out battling with the urge to fix things before they were ruined.

But then.

There was no fixing something that had begun fractured. They were already missing the pieces.

“Fine.” Megatron ground out and shuffled to the side, within reach of his door panel. “Then there’s no reason for you to be here. Being as we have nothing more to do with each other.”

The door whooshed open.

Ratchet stared at him, his face drained of color. His mouth opened, closed, set in a firm line. He eyed the open doorway.

“It might have been wrong,” he began slowly, haltingly. “But it wasn’t a bad thing.”

Megatron snorted. “No. It was definitely a bad thing. We were two mechs who know better, playing

pretend. Lying to each other and ourselves.” He pointed to the door. “No more lies.”

Ratchet moved to the door and paused, his hand rapping against the jamb. “It wasn’t all lies,” he said, almost too quietly for Megatron to catch, and then he was gone.

The door shut and locked behind him, wrapping Megatron silence, save for the sound of his vents and hisses of his frame. He stared at the door, fans raggedly whirling, anger broiling inside of him for a reason he couldn’t quite name.

No, he was fine. He’d anticipated this. He should have known. He was fine. He was—

Megatron’s fist slammed into the wall. It gave an enormous thud, but did not fracture. It barely dented, truth be told. That damn fool’s energon. It left him weak and pliant, it gave him hope when there was none. It promised things it could not deliver.

He was not fine.

Chapter 7

Fortunately, there was always a distraction to be found on the Lost Light. The ship was in a state of constant activity, and there was no such thing as boredom.

Ratchet did what he always did. He buried himself in work. He locked himself in the morgue and set to examining the scout corpses again. He'd had an idea which might shine a light on the quandary – literally. Sometimes, different wavelengths of lights could reveal things you weren't expecting to see.

It was actually First Aid's idea, he of the creativity, so Ratchet had to give him credit. Without any patients to see, First Aid joined him, and they went through a series of wavelengths before they found one that worked.

Ultraviolet.

"What is that?" First Aid asked, his voice fascinated and horrified in equal measures. Ratchet couldn't blame him. Both emotions rattled through his spark as well.

Ratchet peered at the serrated, roughly circular marks blooming into view on the corpses. They were tiny to start with – tiny on the mech they'd found dead in his suite. The marks increased in size until the largest of them were on the captain. Weirder still were the pockmarks within the circles – three across the top and two along the bottom.

"If I had to guess, I'd say they were bites." Dread pooled heavy in Ratchet's tanks. He'd spent enough time on Earth to see a similarity between these and the marks caused by certain invertebrate creatures.

"Bites?" First Aid repeated. Color drained from his faceplate. He clutched the lamp like it was a lifeline, taking a visible step back from the corpse. "Scraplets?"

Ratchet shook his head and pulled out a ruler. "No. Scraplets remove perfectly circular chunks of metal. The bite edges are smooth and don't have these inner prongs." He frowned. "Also, there'd be a lot less left if they'd been consumed by scraplets. We probably wouldn't have found corpses. Whatever did this drained them of energon. And I'd guess they did it quickly."

First Aid glanced uneasily at the other corpses, and slid a step closer to Ratchet. "You don't think they – it – are still inside them, do you?"

"I doubt it. These mechs have been dead a long time." Ratchet recorded the bites in his datapad along with all of the other details he'd noted. He'd have a group go over his data – specifically, Perceptor, Rung, Rewind, and Skids.

Surely someone recognized the bites.

"Of course, we'd be just unlucky enough to have picked up some kind of parasite that can force itself into stasis when there's no ready food supply, wouldn't we?" Ratchet grumped and tossed the datapad onto an empty tray.

It clattered off the other end, knocking several tools down along. It hit the floor with a loud crunch of the display casing.

First Aid nudged the datapad with the tip of his foot. “So,” he said, composure gathered around him all of a sudden, “Something tells me that little throw wasn’t because we may or may not be carrying a deadly parasite.”

Ratchet pinched the bridge of his nose. “Aid--”

“You’ve been tetchy all morning,” First Aid pointed out as he clicked off the lamp and set it aside. He crouched to pick up the datapad. “And I mean, tetchier than usual, which is already maximum grump as it is.”

Ratchet snatched the datapad from First Aid’s hands, and his successor gave him a pointed look. “So?”

“So you want to tell me what’s wrong, or am I going to have to drag it out of you?” First Aid asked. He pushed his field at Ratchet, modulating it to be warm and comfortable, just like he should for a troubled patient.

You can trust me, it said.

Absolutely not.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Ratchet buried his face in his datapad and reviewed the information he’d already collected. Anything to avoid this conversation, honestly.

Five corpses drained of their fluids. One crashed scout ship, also dry of energon, though the hydraulic and coolant lines had still been flush, albeit a bit congealed.

Wait.

The scout ship had been drained, too?

Could whatever killed the crew had also caused the ship to crash? Had they brought the parasite with them, rather than picking it up on the planet where they’d landed? Was it even a parasite? Or were these marks more the result of some infection like cosmic rust?

“Right. Absolutely nothing,” First Aid said with a sigh. “Which is why you’ve spent every moment of your free time the last few days in the medbay, when you’d finally stopped doing that a few weeks ago.”

Ratchet narrowed his optics. “Are you implying something here?”

“Outright insinuating.” First Aid’s optical band brightened, as his field flexed out with amusement. He leaned forward as though he intended to say something else, until his head tilted ever so slightly, his attention beyond Ratchet’s shoulder. “Oh. Megatron’s here.”

It felt like a punch to the tanks, for all that Megatron arriving in the medbay was a daily occurrence. Ratchet went stiff and focused on his datapad. He didn’t look over his shoulder at Megatron striding inside. He didn’t try to admire those long, powerful legs or those broad shoulders or the glint in Megatron’s optics.

Ratchet didn't miss what they had. It was over for a reason.

"He's just here for his energon." Ratchet made a few nonsense notes with his stylus, his spark throb-throb-throbbing. "Go get it for him, will you?"

"No need. Medibot took care of it," First Aid said. He hooked a stool with his ankle and dragged it closer, dropping into it. "Though it's curious, you know, since you've been personally giving Megatron his poison for the past few months."

Ratchet narrowed his optics over the edge of his datapad. "If you have something to say, spit it out."

"You're such a ray of sunshine today," First Aid grumbled, but there was humor in the tilt of his head. "And I'm not *saying* anything. I'm making an observation. A correlation, if you will, between your current behavior and your past behavior and the fact Megatron looks disappointed to be handed a cube by Medibot."

"He's not disappointed. He's disgusted. You know that stuff tastes like slag." Ratchet rolled his shoulder and vanished behind the datapad, doodling in the margins of his notes.

It took him far too long to realize he was sketching the shape of Megatron's head.

"I don't think that's the only reason." First Aid planted his elbow on the medberth, near the deceased mech's right shoulder.

Ratchet rolled his optics, erased his last work, and tucked the datapad away before the incriminating evidence could be viewed by anyone. "Pah. Why do you care anyway? He's Megatron."

"He's still a member of the crew. And a patient." First Aid's visor dimmed. He pushed to his feet and stood near one of their autopsied guests. "As much as I despise what Megatron's done and what the war has cost me. I know I should hate him with every plate of armor on my frame, but a part of me really hopes he's sincere. I want to believe he is. Because the war is over. I want it to stay that way." He braced his hands on the edge of the gurney, shoulders set, field heavy.

Ratchet sighed. "Me, too, kid. I think we're all tired of war. Even Megatron." He patted First Aid on the shoulder, thinking to offer comfort.

"Tired of losing maybe." First Aid snorted and looked up. "Though I guess I don't need to believe in him half as hard as you do."

"What the frag are you talking about?"

First Aid straightened and started gathering up tools. "You should be a little more careful when you're buffing out paint streaks. You keep missing a few."

Ice drizzled through Ratchet's spark. He staggered, hip hitting the edge of the gurney. "You-- I--" Words failed him.

"I'm not judging," First Aid said. He turned and dumped the tools into a disinfection station. "I mean, you could have chosen better than Megatron, I guess. But since you've been so much better, I didn't want to say anything."

“Better?” Ratchet echoed, feeling faint. He supposed he wasn’t as discreet as he thought.

“More engaged? I don’t know.” First Aid fiddled with a magnifying scope, pretending to examine it. “Certainly more than you have been since Drift left. And yes, I *know*. That was purely platonic, but the point is, you needed someone – friend or lover – and I never guessed that someone would be Megatron, but if it works, it works.”

Ratchet swallowed a sigh. “Worked,” he corrected. There was no point to denying it anymore. “If you’re going to be accurate.”

First Aid nodded slowly and set the magnifying scope aside. “Yeah, I thought it might be something like that.” He turned to face Ratchet, offering his field as well, still modulated for comfort as it had been before. “You want to talk about it?”

“No.” Ratchet scooped up the samples he’d collected earlier, tucking the entire crate under his arm. “I’m going to get this info to Perceptor and Rewind, see if they recognize the marks. I don’t like mysterious pathogens, and I want answers.”

First Aid was a good friend, and an even better protege, but Ratchet wasn’t interested in poking at wounds that hadn’t even started to mend. He especially wasn’t thrilled with the idea of discussing said wound with First Aid. This was a little too personal for Ratchet’s comfort.

“If you change your mind--”

Ratchet shook his head. “I won’t.”

“But if you do.”

“I know where to find you,” Ratchet said. He keyed his code into the door so it would open, a whoosh of fresh air (comparatively speaking, it at least didn’t smell of decaying metal) slapping him in the face.

He paused, however, because of all the ways he expected this conversation to go, it had turned out like none of them. Ratchet had been underestimating a lot of mechs evidently.

“Thanks, Aid,” Ratchet said. “For not judging, I mean.”

“What’s there to judge?” He assumed more than saw First Aid’s shrug. “The war’s over, isn’t it? We’re all just trying to figure out who we are now.”

And I’m apparently a coward, Ratchet thought sourly, and he left.

~

Ratchet fully intended to head to Perceptor’s lab.

Somehow, he found himself sidetracked and walking into Swerve’s instead. It was relatively quiet inside, this being the middle of what they perceived to be day-shift. There were only about a dozen or so mechs scattered around the room, either sitting alone or in small, quiet groups. Ratchet found a

seat at the bar, and Swerve was there in an instant, grin in place.

“What can I get ya, doc?” he asked, with evident false cheer. Kid was a master of it.

“Something that better be a lot bigger than that shot you taunted me with before,” Ratchet grunted.

“Seriously. You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?” Swerve’s light shifted behind his visor. “It was months ago, doc. Talk about someone who can hold a grudge.” He turned around, hands moving as he pulled bottles from the shelf, dumping splashes into the same cup.

Primus only knew what Ratchet would end up drinking.

“Is this seat taken?”

Ratchet looked up and managed a grin for one of his favorite mechs in the universe. “I was saving it for you.” He patted the empty stool beside him. “Have a seat. What are you up to today?”

“Taking over for Swerve in a bit. Says he has a date.” Bluestreak eased into the stool, looking so much better now than he did during the war. Peace suited him. Well, peace and thousands of hours of therapy.

“Really? With who?”

“None of your business,” Swerve said as he set a cube in front of Ratchet, the swirl of colors nearly hypnotic. Ratchet resisted the urge to scan it for toxins. Surely Swerve wasn’t that stupid. “Thanks for coming in, Blue. I owe you one.”

“Twenty,” Bluestreak corrected. “But who’s counting?”

“You apparently.” Swerve snorted and slid something to Bluestreak as well, though it appeared to be regular mid-grade, perhaps flavored with one of his many non-alcoholic mixes.

Bluestreak beamed. He took a deep sip of his drink. Ratchet peered into his own. Was it toxic? Was it poison? Dare he try it? Had Swerve used a little bit of everything intoxicating in his possession? Was he trying to make a point?

Ratchet picked up the cube, tilted it left and right. He watched the glitter dance in the suspension. It smelled sweet to a tentative sniff.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Bottoms up.

Ratchet tipped the cube back and drained half in one go. It sludge-dripped into his mouth, landing with a sizzling plop on his glossa. It was sour, so sour, and Ratchet swallowed in a hurry. He grimaced as it seeped down his intake, kind of tingling and burning at the same time.

Yeah. He couldn’t wait until it filled his tanks. He prepped an emergency purge just in case.

“So.” Bluestreak leaned his elbows on the counter, shoulders hunched, and gave Ratchet a pointed look. “How are you?”

Ratchet snorted. “I’m amazing,” he said. “Which is why I’m sitting here drinking a questionable concoction of Swerve’s.” His tank warmed, liquid gurgling a bit, but it stayed down.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Bluestreak nudged him with a shoulder. His field slid warm and liquid against Ratchet’s, offering the same comfort Ratchet had rejected from First Aid. Blue, though. Bluestreak was a different story.

“Who is he?” Bluestreak asked.

“Huh?” Ratchet feigned ignorance.

“The mech warming your berth,” Bluestreak clarified with a roll of his optics. He fiddled with his mid-grade. “There’s gotta be someone because I know you, Ratchet. I know what things are like. And since you didn’t call me when I came aboard, there’s gotta be someone else.”

“Think you’re that attractive, do you?” Ratchet sipped a long drag of his mysterious concoction. If anything, it burned even more this time around.

Bluestreak laughed. He leaned against Ratchet’s side, their armor sliding together warmly. “Mmm. I know I am,” he purred. “So. Who is it?”

“No one important.” Like the Pit Ratchet was going to tell Bluestreak his lover was not only a former Decepticon, but the commander of them. He was not likely someone to be as understanding as First Aid. Not after what he’d lived through.

Bluestreak *loathed* Decepticons. Though given the fact he’d signed up for the Lost Light knowing he was aboard probably meant he was on a road to recovery in that aspect.

“I doubt that. If he weren’t important, you wouldn’t be here feeling like someone broke your tool kit.”

Curse Bluestreak and his extraordinary sensitivity to energy fields. That ability had always been the bane of their friendship, and another reason Ratchet never accepted Bluestreak as anything more than a casual playmate. If a mech couldn’t occasionally lie and keep his secrets, then what fairness was there in the world? Honestly. Couldn’t a mech sulk and pretend he wasn’t in peace?

Ratchet sighed and downed the last of the sludge. The first half had finally reached his tanks, and it sat there like a hot, lead weight, sending little surges of arrhythmic charge through his lines. The rest would probably make him dizzy. Good thing he wasn’t driving home.

“It’s unimportant because it wasn’t long enough to be labeled important, and it wasn’t a relationship anyhow,” Ratchet said. His glossa felt a little numb. He rolled it around in his mouth, pressed the tip to his denta.

Bluestreak took the empty cube away from him, and replaced it with his own midgrade. “Here, wash whatever that is out of your mouth. I think Swerve put a drop or two of dweller venom in it.”

“Of course he did,” Ratchet grouched. Dweller venom wouldn’t kill in that volume, but it would make one tingle and feel more intoxicated than you actually were.

Ratchet sipped at the cube. Ah, he could feel his glossa again. Good news.

Dweller venom. Dweller venom. There was something about it that nagged at the edge of Ratchet’s conscious. It sounded important, though he couldn’t put a finger on why. His thoughts swam in a sea

of unidentified engex. And now, dweller toxin. Great.

“You’re going to have a Pit of a headache in the morning,” Bluestreak sighed. He hop-scooted his stool a little closer, so they were plating to plating. “Want to talk about it?”

“No, I don’t, Aid. And stop asking,” Ratchet grumbled. He swirled the midgrade around and around and around. It whirled with a lot of pretty colors. What was it flavored with? Magnesium?

Bluestreak giggled. Only he could pull off a giggle and make it sound endearing rather than aggravating. “I’m Bluestreak.”

“I know who you are.” Ratchet rolled his optics.

He nearly rolled right off the stool. He grabbed the counter to catch his balance, the world dipping and swaying beneath him. Bluestreak grabbed his elbow.

“Someone pushed me,” Ratchet decided.

“No, you were stupid enough to drink a Swerve concoction without checking the blend,” Bluestreak retorted, but his voice was warm more than chastising. He squeezed Ratchet’s elbow. “Come on. Off the chair. I got enough time to get you back to your suite before I take over for Swerve.”

“I,” Ratchet straightened and looked down his nose at Bluestreak, “am bigger than you.”

“But you can still walk.” Bluestreak’s lips curved with amusement. He hopped down and tugged Ratchet with him. “Or is there someone else I should call? I know you like the big mechs.” He wagged his optical ridges and managed to look adorable rather than lewd.

“Anyone but Megatron,” Ratchet grumbled and tottered toward the door. Someone was holding his elbow. It was odd.

He looked down. Grey hand. But small. Not Megatron.

Ratchet followed the hand up the arm to the elbow and the shoulder and to a face. “Bluestreak!” he declared. “There you are.”

“Here I am.” There was a queer look on Bluestreak’s face now. Ratchet didn’t have a name for it.

He looked sad and angry. He looked conflicted.

“You’re a good kid, Blue,” Ratchet said, because it was true and because it looked like Bluestreak needed to hear it. “Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

“I know that, Ratchet. Come on.” Bluestreak towed him toward the door, and that seemed like a good idea.

Bluestreak was cute. He also gave the best blow jobs, and Ratchet could rather use a blow job right now. So he toddled after Bluestreak like a well-behaved mech because Bluestreak rewarded good behavior in the best ways.

“It’s a good thing you know where I live,” Ratchet said. “I’m not sure I remember.” His processor was very fuzzy, and his face felt hot. The ground didn’t seem to be where he remembered it to be

either.

He couldn't feel his glossa anymore. He was sure it was there though. He kept wiggling it, pressing against the back of his denta. It kept vanishing though.

Bluestreak's grip on his elbow tightened. Maybe to keep Ratchet from floating away. He wasn't sure his feet were touching the ground. "So. Megatron?"

"Ugh. Don't talk to me about that slagger." Ratchet sneered. Or tried to. His lips didn't droop the right way. "You can't trust him, Blue. No matter how much you might want to. You just can't. His hands are filthy."

But never raised in anger, at least, not toward Ratchet. They'd never hurt, except by accident. He'd always been gentle, reverent almost. Never reaching without asking. Never touching without assuming. Cautious, as though one brush of his fingers would cause Ratchet to screech assault and summon security. Knew his place, that one did. Knew it a little too well.

"Well, he's Megatron," Bluestreak pointed out as they stepped off a lift and started toward the medical bay.

Ratchet wasn't sure when they'd gotten on a lift in the first place. The world was a smear of color and sound, and Bluestreak kept morphing into First Aid, which was just odd. He should see a medic about that.

"He's dangerous," Bluestreak added

"That's my point!" Ratchet threw his hands into the air. Well, hand. Bluestreak's grip on the other was firm. "And I tried to tell him, that's why I had to walk away. Couldn't trust him. Couldn't tell him the truth. Couldn't deal with the guilt. Selfish slagger didn't even try to understand." He huffed, and then vented.

Dizziness swept through his processor. Ratchet staggered. But Bluestreak was there to keep him upright, his field nice and steady, calm like a pool. Calm like it hadn't been in centuries. Peace suited Bluestreak. It was good for him. Ratchet would tear Megatron's spark out with his own two hands if that fragger decided to take them back to war, his own desires bedamned.

Oddly enough, killing Megatron would bring Ratchet no pleasure. Or vindication. Or relief. It would solve nothing.

Ratchet sighed. "Worst part, though, is I liked him. I thought. Frag. I dunno what I thought. Something stupid, I'll bet."

The thing about memories were that emotions were brighter, stronger, if they were good memories. And darker, heavier, if they were bad. Processors were finicky things. Sometimes, they only focused on the good. They didn't care about the moralities of the bad.

Bluestreak squeezed his elbow. "You want to believe in people, Ratchet. That's why you're the best medic out there."

They stopped in front of a door. A very familiar door. Ratchet squinted at it and the code panel. He slapped his palm against it, and to his surprise, the door opened. Well what do you know. It was his door.

Bluestreak guided him inside, and Ratchet followed because Bluestreak was good at giving orders. Especially when those orders involved the berth which was where Bluestreak was heading. Excitement surged in Ratchet's spark. It had been ages since he and Bluestreak had a tumble. It was about time. He'd missed it.

"Lay down," Bluestreak said. He used the firm tone which never failed to send shivers down Ratchet's spinal strut, mostly because you never expected that kind of dominance to come out of a mech so cute.

"Okay," Ratchet said.

He climbed into his berth. His backstrut creaked and twinged. His berth was comfortable, but it was large and empty. It was missing something. He could have sworn there was supposed to be someone next to him.

"Bluestreak?" He blinked, the world hazy, like he was seeing through a long, dark tunnel. "You staying?"

"Sorry. Wish I could." Fingers wrapped around Ratchet's hand, tucking it back against his frame. "I don't envy you in the morning for sure. I'm going to give Swerve a piece of my mind, putting that junk in your drink. He knows better." Bluestreak's engine growled.

Ratchet chuckled. Bluestreak was so cute when he was angry. "Wish you could stay," he said. His free hand patted the empty berth. "Supposed to be someone here."

"So you've said." Bluestreak sighed and pressed a kiss to Ratchet's knuckles before he leaned over the berth and brushed his lips over Ratchet's chevron, too. "He doesn't deserve you."

Ratchet wriggled into the comfort of his berth. It really was very nice. It left the world less spinning and more stable. Recharge was probably a good idea right now.

"Going to recharge now," Ratchet murmured.

"Good." Bluestreak squeezed his hand again. "I just want you to know that if he hurt you, Ratchet, I'm going to kill him. You know I can."

Ratchet's spark clenched. Yes, he did. He wished Bluestreak never learned, but such was the way of war.

"It's okay. No one hurt me." Ratchet patted Bluestreak gently on the cheek. Or he made a valiant attempt, at any rate. His hand wasn't obeying him anymore. "Promise. I hurt myself. That's the way it goes."

Bluestreak sighed and repositioned Ratchet's hand at his side, patting it gently into place. "Recharge, okay? I'll send someone to check on you later."

Ratchet hummed. The world was already getting soft and wispy around him, his frame sinking more into the berth. He was floating again, and it was oddly soothing.

He didn't hear his door open and lock behind Bluestreak. He did, however, notice the lingering sensation of loneliness.

It followed him all the way into recharge.

~

Ratchet online and immediately wanted to die.

He groaned and tried to roll over, but his limbs didn't want to obey him. One arm flopped over his frame, hand slapping him in the face.

Ow.

"Well, well, well."

The soft-spoken voice felt like knives to Ratchet's sensory suite. He quickly shuttered his optics and let out a pitiful groan.

"Let me die," he croaked.

Rung chuckled, and the bed dipped beside Ratchet. "Here. Drink this." Something nudged against his lips.

Medical grade by the smell of it. There was no mistaking the flat, tasteless odor. Ratchet grimaced. It would be the best thing for him right now, but it tasted awful.

He lifted his head, and that sent a spike of pain through his spinal strut. Ratchet endured, lips prodding at the edge of the cube until he managed to tilt it, the thin energon pouring into his parched mouth. He swallowed a few mouthfuls, much to the regret of his churning tank, and gladly sank back into the comfort of the berth.

"Swerve is dead," Ratchet muttered. He offline his optics and tried to stop the world from spinning.

Rung's fingers gently stroked over his aching head. "The story as I hear it is that you drank whatever he put in front of you. Not a wise decision."

Bluestreak, that little traitor. Of course he'd told Rung. It was sweet of him, to look out for Ratchet like that, but by Primus, he didn't want to start his morning with another lecture about his drinking habits.

Ratchet growled and blindly reached out, grinning as he hooked both hands on Rung's smaller frame. He tugged and turned all at once, managing to enfold Rung in his arms and trap him between the wall and Ratchet's greater bulk.

Rung squeaked, a most undignified sound, and made it all worth it.

"If you wanted a cuddle, you could have said so," Rung admonished.

"Too much effort." Ratchet sighed.

Rung was a comforting presence, but not the one Ratchet wanted, he realized sourly. Rung was small and compact in his arms, angles in all the wrong places, and far too round. He smelled like ancient things and bonding glue and basic polish.

He wasn't Megatron.

Ratchet ground his denta, and then stopped because that made his processor ache too much. "You give bad advice."

Rung, who had wriggled around until he got comfortable, stroke Ratchet's arm. "You'll have to be more specific. To which advice are you referring?"

"Don't play word games with me. I'm too hungover for that," Ratchet grumbled.

Rung's field modulated and spread out over his, soothing down the ruffled edges. "Ratchet, I'm not going to take responsibility for a choice you made. Or the way you tend to extrapolate everything."

Ratchet pressed his lips together and sank into a sullen silence. Yes, he was aware of his immature behavior. No, he did not care. Even ancient medics with one foot in the grave were allowed to brood every once in a while.

"I take it you ended things with Megatron rather than reveal the truth about the fool's energon?" Rung's tone was light, but there was something of chastisement in it.

Ratchet squeezed Rung tighter. "It was for the best."

"For whom?"

"Both of us."

"Which is why you felt the need to drink a strange concoction of Swerve's. And why Megatron has been moping around the ship like someone told him Starscream has now usurped the Decepticons."

Ratchet snorted a laugh at the idea of Megatron moping about anything. Why would he be disappointed? It was a game all along, wasn't it? Wasting time with Ratchet while he schemed about how to avoid his death sentence.

"He's Megatron," Ratchet mumbled, his standard reply, because it should explain more than enough to everyone. And see how it easy it was for Bluestreak to get it? Why didn't First Aid? Why didn't Rung?

"He's a sum of parts, Ratchet. Not a single title."

Ratchet lapsed into silence. His processor throbbed. He owed Bluestreak an apology, and probably lots of damage control as well. He still needed to get that data to some scientists who might be able to make heads or tails of it. He had to be on shift soon. He couldn't lay here in agony. He was the Chief – well, no. That title would be First Aid's. He was a medic.

"If you wanted a relationship with him, why did you end things?" Rung asked, poking at an open wound because that was what he did.

"It wasn't a relationship," Ratchet snarled. He pulled away from Rung and sat up, even though it

made his head swim. He groped the nightstand for the cube Rung had brought him.

Rung turned over to face him. “Wasn’t it?” he asked with an arched orbital ridge and that knowing tone to his voice grated on Ratchet’s patience. And Rung knew it, too.

Ratchet glared. “Don’t give weight to something that doesn’t deserve it.” He sucked down half the medical grade. “And don’t psycho-analyze me about it either.”

Rung frowned, and the way his orbital ridges drew down made him adorable. “You know that’s more Froid’s area of expertise than mine.” He reached for Ratchet’s hand and clasped it between his own. “May I offer some advice?”

“You know I respect your opinion,” Ratchet sighed.

“Then listen to me.” Rung squeezed his hand, and the weight of his stare behind his glasses was unyielding. “Ratchet, beneath the bluster and the age and the crippling fear of becoming obsolete--”

Ratchet rolled his optics. “Wow. Thanks.”

“Let me finish,” Rung said as he sat up and shifted to sit beside Ratchet, his feet dangling over the edge of the berth. “Beneath it all, you are one of the kindest, most forgiving, and loyal mechs I have ever had the pleasure of befriending. If you saw something in Megatron worth loving--”

Ratchet choked on his next ventilation. “Loving!?” he spluttered.

“Loving,” Rung repeated. “There are different kinds of love and you know it.” His field rippled inward, like a second embrace. “And if you saw it, then I most certainly believe it is there. And if it is, then is that not worth pursuing? No matter the risk, whatever it may be?”

“Are you trying to tell me to use the power of love to reform Megatron?” Ratchet asked, unable to hide the bewilderment in his voice, because that was ridiculous. It was the stuff sparkling tales were borne of.

Rung burst into laughter. “Certainly not.” He shook his head, shoulders bobbing up and down. “Primus, the very thought. No, any reformation in Megatron can only come from Megatron himself. I only meant that if you saw something in Megatron you could love, don’t be so hasty to throw it away because of what you’re afraid it might mean.”

Ratchet slid away from Rung’s embrace and off the berth, wobbling a little on his feet. “Fine,” he said with a scowl. “But that still doesn’t solve the issue of my very real ethical predicament.”

“That is an answer only Rodimus or Ultra Magnus, preferably the latter, can give you.” Rung followed him off the berth. “You might consider speaking with Xaaron as well.”

No thanks. The less who knew about the relationship the better. Ratchet had already told two more than people than he wanted. His scowl deepened. He rubbed at his forehead.

“Which means you also have to decide if you can live with them knowing about the truth,” Rung added as he pulled a polishing cloth out of subspace and offered it to Ratchet.

“I’m not ashamed of it,” Ratchet retorted, alarmed to find himself feeling so defensive. “It’s just irritating. Do you know how much people on this ship gossip?” He snatched the cloth from Rung’s

hands. Apparently, he'd drooled on himself during his recharge. Gross.

"I'm aware." Rung leaned against the edge of Ratchet's berth, hands folded on his lap. "I also know that gossip has never bothered you. I suspect your protests now are based on guilt rather than embarrassment."

Ratchet sighed. He didn't deign that with a rebuttal because Rung was right. Ratchet didn't want to admit it.

He sank into a chair, burying his aching head behind his palms. He was too tired to think rationally. He'd gone around and around in circles about it. He didn't trust Megatron, but he wanted to. He wanted it to work. He wanted something real, but he didn't know if it was real, and he didn't know if there was a point in asking. He didn't know if he was brave enough to try.

Rung rested a hand on his shoulder. "Megatron is not the only one who deserves a chance to start over."

Ratchet cycled a ventilation. "I know. Primus help me, but I know." He worked his intake. Vented in and out. "I sure hope I don't send Ultra Magnus into a processor lock over this."

Rung chuckled. "He's a lot stronger than you think. If there's anyone who's going to have a reaction, it's Rodimus."

Ratchet winced. His relationship with Rodimus had been strained, even more so as of late, especially once the news of the truth behind Drift's exile emerged and the votes had been cast. Rodimus would only see this, this *thing* between Megatron and Ratchet, as another form of payback from Ratchet. No doubt he would.

Ratchet's head ached even more.

Primus help him.

Chapter 8

The world spun madly on.

Megatron recharged. He went on shift. He did his paperwork. He walked his routes. He hid in the library, researching things that would now see no use. He visited the medbay for his daily dose of poison, only to be served either by drone or First Aid.

Ratchet avoided him as though he carried rustmites.

Couldn't even be civil. But of course not. Because Megatron was evil incarnate, and Ratchet had to bow and scrape before Primus in order to earn forgiveness for so much as touching Primus' Bane.

Soundwave would have told him he was being melodramatic. Worse, that he was starting to imitate Starscream.

Neither of them were here right now. Neither of them had the right to an opinion.

The Lost Light continued speeding toward their destination without a care in the world, heedless to the turmoil twisting and churning inside Megatron. Turmoil that only grew in strength as he strode toward the meeting room where he and a group of the brightest minds on board the ship – plus Rodimus – intended to discuss the corpses in the morgue and the risk they might present.

That group would include Ratchet. As chief medical officer on board – though was up for debate as to whether or not the title was his – it was a given he'd make an appearance. They needed a medic's opinion on the deaths.

Megatron didn't know if he could sit across the table from Ratchet and act like everything was fine.

(It wasn't.)

The door slid open as he approached, greeting him with the low murmur of conversation. It did not immediately cease upon sight of him, an improvement from previous meetings. Megatron headed to the first empty chair, between another empty and a surprisingly small Minimus Ambus.

He swept a gaze around the room, and the surge of relief he felt at not immediately spying Ratchet was ridiculous.

Megatron lowered himself into the seat, which gave an ominous creak beneath him. "I'm not late, am I?"

Perceptor, Brainstorm and Minimus were present. Ratchet and Rodimus were not.

"You are, as usual, quite on time," Minimus said as he bent over a datapad, the screen covered for privacy, but his stylus moving smoothly across it. "In fact, we are only waiting for one more participant--"

The door opened again. "The fun has arrived!" Rodimus declared as he threw out his arms and strutted inside, face beaming with a bright smile. "You may now rejoice."

Minimus sighed.

“Take a seat, Fun,” Perceptor drolled. “I have other things to do so we need to make this quick.”

Rodimus’ lower lip jutted out in a pout, his spoiler halves sinking, as though it was a true disappointment no one had applauded his entrance. “Is everyone here?”

“Yes,” Minimus answered. He flicked his fingers across his datapad and powered it down. “Perceptor, I believe you have a report for us?”

Rodimus flopped down into an empty seat at the head of the table, leaving only the seat beside Megatron as empty. Perhaps it was the chair where Ratchet was meant to sit, if he was going to attend. Though Minimus’ statement seemed to suggest otherwise.

“We have a report that is going to blow your processors,” Brainstorm said as he eagerly leaned forward against the edge of the table. He gestured broadly. “You’re not going to believe this.”

Perceptor visibly twitched. He set down a holographic projector, bringing to life a three-dimensional image of the corpses. A tap of the finger and the projector started cycling through pictures, one of which was of a mark Megatron had not seen before: five holes arranged within a circle.

“We believe these marks to be the overall cause of death,” Perceptor began, with very bo preamble whatsoever. “After extensive measuring, theorizing, and investigation, I have determined they are indicative of a predatory species--”

“Vampires,” Brainstorm inserted with a sage nod and a gleam of glee in his optics.

Perceptor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “We are not calling them that.”

“At least he’s admitting there’s a ‘we’ now.” Brainstorm nudged Perceptor with his elbow, a rather brave act in Megatron’s opinion. Said scientist had gone from meek physicist to pinpoint accurate sniper over the course of the war.

Mech who could make a change like that was not a mech one wanted to bother.

“Vampires,” Rodimus repeated, and he was perhaps the only one in the room who could echo Brainstorm’s glee with the same enthusiasm. “Like pale, organic, dressed in black, with fangs and wanting to suck your blood?” At fangs, he literally formed fangs with his fingers and held them up to his lips.

Megatron sighed. “I doubt that is what Perceptor meant.”

“Unfortunately, excluding the organic details, yes, that is what I meant.” Perceptor peered at his datapad as though it would provide some sort of lifeline. “This species indeed has fangs – the five prong marks we detected, and their saliva is detectable by blacklight. They suck blood – in our case, energon. It is why the ship’s tanks were also dry.”

“So it consumes energon in all forms,” Megatron said.

“We’ve yet to decide if they are energon-specific, or if they are energy vampires in general,” Brainstorm pointed out as he plucked a datapad out of subspace and tried to shove it into Perceptor’s view. “They could be responsible for the spark burnout. Or that’s a consequent of the rapid energon-

loss.”

“I have asked Ratchet to give us his professional opinion. I’m waiting on his report,” Perceptor said with another sweep of his stylus over his datapad. He ignored Brainstorm’s datapad with practiced disinterest.

Oh, to be a casseticon on the wall of their laboratory. It had to be entertaining.

Rodimus squinted and looked around the table as though he’d suddenly realized they didn’t have a medic present. “Wait. Where is Ratchet? I thought he was coming to this.”

“Would you like his words or something more polite?” Perceptor’s ocular patch flashed at them. “Or I can paraphrase: he’s busy.”

Busy. Right. Megatron didn’t believe that for a moment. Ratchet was avoiding him, the coward. Like it was Megatron’s idea to end this thing between them.

“Busy,” Rodimus echoed. He plopped an elbow on the edge of the table and rubbed at his forehead. “Let me get this straight. We’re potentially lightspeeding toward danger, and he’s too busy to let us know how much danger we’re in?”

Perceptor stared. Coming from him, it was a lot more eerie than it used to be. “I am assuming that question is rhetorical, since I have no control over Ratchet and apparently, neither do our captains.”

Ouch.

Megatron flinched. Rodimus gaped.

Ultra Magnus – or Minimus for the meeting today, perhaps the armor was getting sanitized – coughed a ventilation. “How have we never encountered them before?”

“We have,” Perceptor said. “There are recorded instances of spacefaring Cybertronians encountering creatures such as these, but no deaths. In most instances, they were able to escape with minimal ill-effects.”

“What was so different this time?” Megatron asked.

Brainstorm spread his hands. “You see, the knights are *old*, right? So old they are even built differently from us. So old they probably met up with these creatures when they were still primitive, didn’t even know what we were really, except we smelled and tasted good. Plus, you know, the crash.”

“Smelled?” Rodimus shivered theatrically, his spoiler flattening against his back.

“In a manner of speaking. They are probably able to detect particles of energy left behind by creatures capable of mechanically creating it, much like we can track a ship’s vapor trail,” Perceptor said blandly. He was the only one in the room who didn’t look horrified. Excluding Brainstorm, who appeared excited, and probably wanted them to catch a specimen as soon as possible.

Megatron shifted his weight and his chair creaked noisily beneath him, effectively gathering everyone’s attention without his intent. “How much of a threat do they pose to us?”

“Minimal, in my professional opinion, especially if we approach them already aware of the danger.” Perceptor set his datapad on the table and laced his fingers together over it. “We are larger, better armored, and better armed. And though it pains me to admit, we are also more than accustomed to war and defending ourselves.”

“We owe it to science to investigate these things and learn more about them. Who knows! Their ability to sniff out energy could theoretically mean we could use them to find energon deposits or other important things!” Brainstorm threw his hands into the air and fell back dramatically into his chair. “Imagine it!”

“Right now, I’d settle for surviving an encounter with them,” Rodimus said, some of the pep gone from his voice. He might, also, have edged a bit further from the over-excitable scientist. “How big would you say they are?”

Perceptor shook his head. “I can’t be certain. These could be bites, or they could be teathed cables. Therefore the creature could range from the size of a scraplet to a size equivalent to Thunderclash.”

Silence swept through the meeting room. Megatron cringed, and even Brainstorm visibly deflated in the wake of that revelation.

“On the bright side,” Brainstorm managed weakly. “Scientific advancement.” He wriggled his fingers in front of his face and spread his hands. “It’s worth it.”

Rodimus leaned back in his chair, propping one foot on the edge of the table. “We’re going regardless. This is the first clearer than mumbo-jumbo lead we’ve gotten on the knights. It just means we’re going in locked and loaded.”

A sentiment Megatron could appreciate, and he had to admit, it was refreshing to see this amount of forward thinking from Rodimus. Though it was only a reminder that he would not be armed. He doubted anyone trusted him with a weapon.

It wouldn’t be the first time he’d defended himself with only his fists and his charm.

“If it is at all possible, I would like to examine at least one of the creatures,” Perceptor said.

“Dissect!” Brainstorm chimed in.

“Examine,” Perceptor corrected, giving Brainstorm the iciest look he had in his arsenal no doubt. “But don’t put yourself in danger on my account.”

“Hey, you want a specimen, I’ll get you a specimen.” Rodimus’ shoulders danced in an elaborate shrug, accompanied by a wink.

Minimus audibly sighed. “We shall do our best to safely acquire a creature for further study. Of course, you could always accompany us when we investigate the coordinates.”

“I don’t know about this one here,” Brainstorm said, gesturing to Perceptor with a thumb. “But definitely count me in.”

They hashed out a few more details, nothing concrete, just suggestions for what type of weaponry might be effective against a being which consumed energy or energy-specific fluids. Megatron stared at the holographic image of the bites or whatever they were, a sense of foreboding churning in his

tanks.

Then again, that churning had been present since he stepped foot on this ship. Somehow, Rodimus tended to attract the most unusual and dangerous of circumstances. This entire ship was madness, and Megatron felt swept along in it.

Perhaps that explained his desire to form a relationship with the only person aboard who could have been a worst idea than Rodimus himself.

“Okay!” Rodimus clapped his hands together. “Sounds like we got a good plan. Unless someone has any objections?” He looked around the room, waited for all of a split-second, and grinned. “That’s what I thought. Onward to adventure then!”

He pointed toward the door with a wriggle of his spoiler.

Megatron supposed that was meant to be a dismissal of some kind. As did everyone else, as they stood and gathered their things, Brainstorm sticking to Perceptor like an electro-burr, chattering madly at the back of his head. Whether or not Perceptor listened was a matter of debate. Megatron took his time, more than aware he was as much apart from the rest as he was a part of them.

The meeting room emptied, but Minimus lingered, intercepting Megatron before he could escape like the others. Minimus’ mustache quivered. His hands were tucked behind his back. He looked, of all things, nervous.

“Sir, might have a moment of your time?”

Megatron had the strangest feeling he would not like this conversation. But as captain of the ship, he had to engage.

“Yes, Minimus. How can I help you?”

Minimus glanced at the door, where the tail end of Brainstorm could be seen skipping after Perceptor until the door shut behind him. “It’s about Ratchet.”

Yes, definitely a conversation he should have avoided.

“Is it now?” Megatron kept his tone as mild as he could.

“Yes.” Minimus paused, his face creasing with indecision before he boldly continued forward, “Sir, I must admit I am not very skilled at social interaction, but I have noticed the two of you have been... strained as of late. And while there is little I can do to help, might I suggest you speak with Rung for answers as to how to proceed?”

Megatron stared at him. “Proceed?”

“Yes, sir.” Minimus shifted his weight. “While I appreciate your recent dedication to your work, which supersedes even your usual dedication, including going so far as to fix that crooked rivet which was vexing me for so long, I’ve been told that such diligent behavior is usually indicative of personal turmoil.”

Megatron nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but Minimus barged along as though he had to get the words out lest he forget or lose his nerve. Megatron’s mouth snapped back shut.

“The fact that Ratchet is completing his work early is also of concern, especially considering he doesn’t file his reports until prompted. So while I am afraid I cannot be much assistance when it comes to offering advice or comfort, there is a resource available on the ship, should you be willing to take advantage of it.” Minimus paused to vent and Megatron was quite sure that was the most he’d ever heard out of Minimus or Magnus that did not pertain to a seemingly minor issue. “Sir.” He peered up at Megatron, his mustache bobbing above his lip.

Megatron wheezed. He searched for words and couldn’t find them. He cycled a vent, strangled though it was, and found composure buried beneath the echoes of Minimus’ words.

“I thank you for your concern, Minimus,” he said, leaning heavily on manners because the rest of his processor had short-circuited. “But I assure you, there is nothing between Ratchet and I that could explain either of our behavior. I cannot speak for Ratchet, but I find that I rest easier knowing my work is complete.”

Relief flooded Minimus’ field. He visibly sagged from his pose, which was best described as ‘at attention’. “I am glad to hear it, sir.” Minimus smiled.

At least he wasn’t pushing for more.

“Was that all?”

“Yes, sir.”

Thank Primus. Or maybe thank Unicron, because there’s no way this conversation hadn’t been driven by that Pitpawed beast.

Minimus departed, and Megatron vented. That was one conversation he hadn’t expected to have. He still wasn’t sure if Minimus had divined the relationship between Megatron and Ratchet, or if he correlated their behavior and assumed there was some kind of connection, even if he didn’t know what it might be.

He paused and leaned against the inside wall, rubbing his forehead. There was an ache in his processor he couldn’t quite define. He felt unexpectedly agitated, and he couldn’t pin a finger on why. Given their current course straight toward danger both known and unknown might have had something to do with it, but only if Megatron wanted to lie to himself.

He knew good and well the restless stirring in his spark was about Ratchet. He hadn’t expected to get attached. For it to mean anything more than several good overloads. He certainly hadn’t expected to start trusting Ratchet. Part of him always knew it was ephemeral. That it wouldn’t last. Yet, he’d still been surprised when the end came.

He was not so naïve to call it unfair, but the spark was not a rational thing. It railed at the unfairness of the universe.

Megatron gathered up his datapad and the holoprojector Perceptor left behind. He might as well research on his own. Avenues of exploration with Ratchet were now closed to him, but he still had the stirrings of something in the back of his processor.

He opened the door and stepped out, focused on his datapad and paying attention to little else. Which was why he’d missed the fact someone was lying in wait for him outside the door. Said someone slid

into his path, and Megatron's peripheral sensors pinged, prompting him to halt. He looked up and blinked. He didn't immediately recognize the Autobot.

Grey and red, chevroned like Prime's infernal tactician, but not the one named Smokescreen. He was blue, Megatron was sure of this. He searched his databanks, cycling through face after face, before a name popped up: Bluestreak. A sniper, not a tactician, from Praxus like so many with that frame type. Largely undecorated throughout the war, though he had led a unit once.

"Bluestreak," Megatron greeted smoothly. He tipped his head. "Can I help you?"

"That depends," Bluestreak replied, with more attitude than Megatron would have expected given Megatron's reputation. He folded his arms.

"On?"

"Whether or not you're going to tell me about Ratchet."

Megatron frowned. "I'm not sure to what you are referring. If you have any questions about your chief medic, you should direct them to him."

Bluestreak snorted. "I've got his side. More or less. I want yours." He tilted his head, optics narrowing. "And you're lucky I'm even bothering to get your side. If I didn't trust Ratchet so much, this conversation would have started a lot differently."

"And how would that be?"

"I'd have arrived with security."

Megatron pinched the bridge of his nose. He stepped back and gestured toward the door. "Do you want to sit inside and talk or--"

"Here's fine." Bluestreak pointedly looked to the left and right. "In public. In view of the cameras. There's no audio, otherwise Ratchet might never forgive me, but I'm pretty sure I can hold my own until security can pry you off me, if you decide to attack."

Megatron worked his jaw. "I've been aboard the ship for months and have yet to hurt anyone. What makes you think I intend to start now?"

"Because mechs don't change. At least, not that quickly." Bluestreak looked up at Megatron, not an ounce of fear in his optics despite the fact Megatron towered over him. He gave the sniper much credit for his bravery. "Look, I don't want lurid details. I don't want to know what your relationship entails or what it means--"

"Nothing," Megatron corrected. "As there is no relationship, past and present, save that between a commander and his subordinate."

Bluestreak snorted. "You and I both know that's a lie. My point is, I don't care about any of that. I just want to know your answer."

Amused despite himself, Megatron arched an orbital ridge. "To what?"

"Whether or not you're sincere."

“This again?” Megatron’s head ached. He resisted the urge to rub it, both because he couldn’t, and because it would be a sign of weakness.

“I don’t mean about Ratchet. I already know the answer to that. I meant about your defection.”

Megatron started at him. “I thought that one was obvious.”

Bluestreak leaned forward and rolled his optics. “Oh, it’s *obvious* you’re just waiting for the first chance to screw us over. What I’m waiting for is whether or not you’re going to prove me wrong.”

“What makes you think you’re even owed this?” Megatron demanded. “It’s no one’s business but ours.”

“Because I don’t like you.” Bluestreak’s shoulders twitched, like he was trying to move kibble no longer present. Megatron had seen Starscream make a similar motion before. “If it were up to me, you wouldn’t be on this ship. You’d be dead, like you deserve, and the rest of the Decepticons with you. Sometimes, people deserve second chances. Well, you’ve had more than you deserve, and I’m just waiting for the moment you reveal your true colors, so I can take your head off with one shot.”

Megatron stared at him. Bluestreak admitted it all in a flat tone, his optics dead, his posture remaining without threat in it. Like he’d become a completely different mech.

Bluestreak grinned, showing denta. “Lucky for you, it’s not up to me. You’re getting the opportunity you don’t deserve, but that doesn’t mean I have to watch you take Ratchet down with you. I won’t.” He straightened, shoulders going back. “So are you going to answer my question, Captain Megatron, or am I going to have to take my concerns to Ultra Magnus and Rodimus and the head of the security force?”

Chills crept down Megatron’s spinal strut. Looking into Bluestreak’s optics was like looking into the abyss, a great big void of nothing. Megatron didn’t want to know what had caused such a fracture inside Bluestreak. But it terrified him in ways few things did.

“I am as sincere as I can be.” Megatron kept his tone and guarded. “And I have no intentions of hurting Ratchet. Besides, I don’t know if you’re aware or not, but the one who ended that particular not-relationship was him.”

“I wasn’t. But I am now.” Bluestreak’s grin lengthened, and he bobbed on the balls of his feet. “Doesn’t change my question. Or, I suspect, the answer you just gave me.”

Megatron rubbed at his forehead. Bluestreak exhausted him in a different way than Rodimus. He felt as though he’d been walking on the edge of a precipice, and spent the entire time wondering if Bluestreak would push him over, or pull him to safety.

“Was that all?”

Blue optics looked him up and down, like searching for a weak spot. “For now,” Bluestreak said. “Have a good evening, sir. And might I suggest some rest? You look pretty tired.” Bluestreak smiled.

There wasn’t an ounce of sincerity in it.

“Your concern is noted,” Megatron replied, his tone a touch frosty perhaps, but he didn’t believe for a moment that Bluestreak’s concern was sincere.

Bluestreak tipped his head in a parody of respect and backed away from Megatron. “Thank you for the talk, sir,” he said. He spun on a heelstrut and strode down the corridor without a backward glance.

Megatron ground his jaw so hard he tasted sparks. He hadn’t registered Bluestreak as anything more than an annoyance, but now he bumped the sniper to menace. For that had clearly been a threat.

He turned the opposite direction. While returning to his hab was a given, Megatron had no interest in hiding in that small, empty room.

He headed for the library instead. There was always research to be done. Not that he believed it had a point, but at least it kept him from going mad. Trapped on this ship as he was, with no contact to anyone who was remotely on his side. Ravage didn’t necessarily count. Ravage was on no side but Ravage’s.

He’d always been like that.

Megatron’s favorite console, tucked away in the corner with only one way to approach, was not being used at the moment. It served as a perfect hiding spot. Very few ventured in here anyway.

Megatron sat and powered up the computer, fingers rapping over the desktop. There were numerous avenues of exploration laid before him, but his hands took him familiar routes, to familiar pages, to a world he’d only just begun to investigate.

Trust, said every message board and guide and manual. Trust was the single most important requirement for this indulgence. Trust between the dom and the sub was paramount. It had to be absolute.

Megatron slumped in his chair.

Trust was such a difficult concept. It was not something he’d ever held in spades. Not even with Soundwave, who was perhaps the only one he even remotely trusted on any level.

He briefly entertained thoughts of the way things could have been. Megatron, speaking to Soundwave in private, without barriers, without the walls of leadership and subordinate to bind them. Asking for something he dared not ask another, putting his safety into Soundwave’s hands, and believing he’d be taken care of.

It wasn’t completely implausible. Once upon a time, it might have even been possible.

Too quickly, the thoughts morphed into what Megatron already knew to be achievable. They morphed into himself, on his knees, chained, and Ratchet behind him, hands firm and knowledgeable. His voice, a low, commanding tone. The strike of the flog, again and again, pain and pleasure spiking in response.

And trust.

He will stop if I say so.

And believing it would happen.

Megatron's hand curled into a fist under his cheek.

Trust, he reasoned, was a many-layered thing.

He flicked his finger across the screen, changing the guide to the next page. Something dark flickered into view. Megatron narrowed his optics, focusing on it.

In the reflection of his monitor, Megatron caught sight of Ravage perched on another console behind him. Which meant Ravage had wanted to be noticed.

Megatron returned to his research. "You're relieved, aren't you?"

"I am comfortable, yes."

Megatron pressed his lips in a brief, thin line. Ravage was always like this, forcing him to clarify when he knew damn well what Megatron meant. "That Ratchet and I are no longer an item," he said, pushing irritation into his voice.

"Oh, yes. That." Ravage shifted with a susurrus of sound. "Well, he's an Autobot."

"As am I."

"I don't think there's a single crewmember on this ship who honestly believes that. And I include you in that statement."

Megatron set his jaw. He stared harder at the computer screen, though he didn't absorb a single word. If he looked hard enough, he could see his own reflection, almost superimposed over Ravage beyond his shoulder.

"You may wear the badge, but that is where the identity ends," Ravage continued as he rose from his recline, arching his back. "They saw how quickly you abandoned the Decepticons. They don't believe for a moment you won't turn around and do the same to them."

Megatron's spark curled into a tighter knot. Was this also what Ratchet meant about being unable to trust Megatron? Not just that he'd been Decepticon commander, but also that he'd turned his back on his faction? It would take more than a speech or two to explain himself. Megatron wasn't entirely sure he could put it into words, unless he simplified it.

He was tired.

"So to answer your question, I'm neither relieved nor sympathetic." Ravage hopped down from the console, padding silently around Megatron's seat. "He's an Autobot medic, and anyway, it wasn't supposed to mean anything. It was entertainment at best, am I right? It – and by extension, he – doesn't matter."

Megatron sat back from the computer, his focus distant. "You're wrong."

"Curious. Which of those statements are inaccurate?"

Sadly, not all of them. Not enough to soothe Megatron's spark.

He rapped his fingers on the desktop, the sharp staccato making Ravage flinch, a petty revenge. "It was not mere fun. Not even at first."

"It was indulgence."

"It was *necessary*."

Ravage stared at him, his optics as cutting as Soundwave's visored stare had always been. "Because he was part of the plan?"

"What plan?" Megatron shoved back from the computer, the stool rattling away behind him. "I had no plan. I have contingencies. I have wisps. I have stratagems, but I have no plan, I have nothing. There is no course of action where I emerge victorious in any shape or form."

He paced around the desk, feeling trapped, though there were any number of directions he could go. Except off the ship, off the Lost Light, away from judgmental Autobots, and medics who couldn't bring themselves to trust him.

"I lost the war." Megatron's hands fisted at his sides, and he stared at nothing. Saw nothing. "In the end, it gained me nothing. What good would it do to start another? What could it accomplish but failure and death and further destruction to the planet and its people?"

"What good?" Ravage hopped on the desk, standing over the keyboard where Megatron had been typing. "You could have tried, Megatron. Rather than abandon us to Autobot mercy, rather than disdain and disown us like our rebellion was nothing to you. You say Soundwave is the traitor, but I look at you, and I can't see anything but a shadow of the mech who used to be great."

Megatron's engine roared. "Death is not greatness. War is not power. We accomplished nothing!" His hand swept through the air, inches from Ravage, not meant to be an attack.

Ravage did not flinch. His hackles rose, armor fluffing out in defensive response.

"You should have led us!" Ravage hissed, claws extending, screeching against the desktop. "If you wanted to try another way, you should have led us to it! Instead you whimper and cower behind an Autobot badge because you think it will protect you, while you wallow in your own guilt." Ravage's tail lashed through the air, his armor vibrating with outrage. "We needed you! We have always needed you! You could have led us toward peace and instead we are stuck clinging to the first mech strong enough to assume control."

Megatron's ventilations churned. Nausea curdled his tanks. His spark pounded; his processor spun. The empty spaces inside of him ached.

"I can't do it," Megatron snarled with far less strength than it should have had. "I can't be what you or Soundwave or anyone else needs me to be. I am tired, Ravage. I am tired of it all. I can't save the Decepticons. I can't save myself. You demand something I can't give any longer. I am neither leader nor savior. I am failure with blood on my hands and death on my spark!"

Ravage's audials flattened. His mouth clamped shut, optics burning like embers of accusation.

Guilt surged inside. Megatron forced his tone to calm. He wasn't angry with Ravage. It would be as if he were angry at the truth.

“I am not worth your loyalty,” Megatron admitted, his vocalizer crackling around the concession, because Ravage was right. He knew this. He’d always known this. “I was a nothing, raging against my fate, and I took you all with me. I promised you all a better life, and all I’ve brought you is madness.”

Ravage leapt from the desk, skulking toward the door. Only he paused, tail hanging low. “Did we die for nothing? Did we sacrifice everything... for nothing?”

“No,” Megatron said. “It was still worth it. To fight.” He worked his intake, over a lump. “But I should have found a better way.”

Ravage’s biolights flickered before going fully dark. “The medic is right,” he said, his voice echoing in the dark. “It’s too much of a risk to trust you.”

He vanished into the shadows, leaving Megatron alone. Ravage’s words bounced back and forth inside Megatron’s head.

He wondered if this was it, if this was the moment he lost Ravage forever. Would the cassette ever return to his side? Did he still consider Megatron someone worth trying for? Or was Megatron alone? For the first time, in a long time, was he finally alone?

Megatron slumped back into his chair and buried his face behind his hands. The computer monitor reflected back at him, aglow with information he’d never use. It didn’t matter if it involved his personal relationship with Ratchet, or escape from a certain doom, none of it was any use.

He was trapped.

* * *

Chapter 9

“The planet’s charted as 18835.113, but the locals call it Clandestine,” Broadside, their current navigator, explained as the planet loomed in front of them, perfectly spherical with barely any atmosphere to speak of. “It’s pretty barren according to our sensors – no local wildlife of the flora or fauna variety. But we have detected Cybertronian signals coming from the southern hemisphere.”

Ratchet hung back from the crowd as the command trio clustered around the main screen, their attention caught by Clandestine as it grew closer. They were heading toward the source of the Cybertronian signals no doubt. Straight into danger, as it were, which came as no surprise.

He folded his arms and stared over their heads at the rust-gray lands of Clandestine. Not a spot of fluid he could see. Nothing to indicate rivers or lakes or oceans or seas. It looked cracked and empty, like it was about to split apart at any moment.

What a terrible place to build a colony. What had brought the knights here? Why this planet? What made it a good choice?

“It’s kind of ugly, isn’t it?”

In his peripherals, Bluestreak was visible stepping up beside him. He nudged Ratchet with a playful elbow.

“But I guess we aren’t here for the sights.” He grinned, his optics dancing with amusement, and his hand slid around Ratchet’s lower back, teasing a seam.

Ratchet ignored the slight frisson of pleasure. “You volunteering for this fool’s expedition?” he asked. He would, of course, be going. Someone had to keep the idiots alive.

Bluestreak snorted. “No. I’m staying right here. Vampires are of no interest to me. Now if we find another port like Quartex, that’s a different story.” He winked and dipped a playful finger against Ratchet’s spinal strut. “I just came up here to check on you.”

Heat filtered into Ratchet’s face. He ignored it. “I’m fine,” he said, more gruffly than he meant. “Appreciate you helping an old, drunk mech back to his room though. If I’d passed out in Swerve’s, I’d have woken up with all manner of designs on my armor.”

He’d seen them do it to others before. Sometimes, the mech was lucky and the lewd phrases and pictures washed off in the racks. Sometimes, the prank was a bit more sinister, and it required paint stripper.

“Just returning the favor.” Bluestreak leaned against Ratchet’s side, sharing warmth, his field flooding Ratchet’s with affection. “I meant though, if you’re okay about what led to your evening of poor choices.”

Ratchet sighed, his optics straying to the front, where the command trio argued amongst themselves about something. Rodimus, no doubt, demanded something ill-advised. Ultra Magnus cautioned they tread lightly. Megatron was caught between them, somehow a mix of both, aggravation painted in the lines of his face as he pinched at the bridge of his nose.

“You sent Rung, didn’t you?” Ratchet asked.

Bluestreak giggled. “I might have mentioned to him that you were in need of some company in the morning.” He leaned harder against Ratchet’s side. “Plus I knew you needed someone to put things in perspective, given what you let slip.”

Ratchet looked at Bluestreak, who had the most innocent expression Ratchet didn’t believe for a moment. “I’m surprised you didn’t leave my traitorous aft in the middle of a hallway.”

“Nothing you’ve done qualifies as a betrayal.” Bluestreak tilted his head, resting his chin on Ratchet’s shoulder. “Just because I’ve got resentment boiling inside of me for centuries, doesn’t mean I’m going to hate you for knowing how to move forward. Besides, if it weren’t for his history, I’d say you two are actually well matched.”

The heat turned into an inferno. Ratchet knew if he looked into a mirror, it would be visible in the dermal layer of his face.

He tore his attention away from Bluestreak, back to the arguing trio, but that was no better choice, because Megatron picked that moment to look their direction. His expression was unreadable, but there was heat in his optics. It was only when his gaze slid to Bluestreak that something flickered over his face before he abruptly turned his attention back to Rodimus, who was dancing with what was, no doubt, a victory.

“Mmm, and I think someone’s a little jealous,” Bluestreak added with a laugh. “Or maybe he’s remembering the warning I gave him.”

“Warning? What? Bluestreak--”

“Oh, it’s fine.” Bluestreak squeezed his arm and lifted up, winking at Ratchet. “You know how it is, Ratchet. I always look after my own, especially when dangerous former warlords take it upon themselves to put hands where they shouldn’t.”

Ratchet rubbed at his face. “I’m not even sure, at this point, if I should be grateful or offended.”

“Grateful,” Bluestreak murmured and planted a kiss on Ratchet’s cheek. “Go have fun on your expedition. You better come back alive.”

“I’ll try.”

Bluestreak chuckled and then he was gone, taking the warmth and comfort of his field with him.

Ratchet sighed and lowered his hand.

Megatron was looking at him again, expression unreadable, but his optics hot. Ratchet shivered, something crawling down his spinal strut. Something a lot like want and need.

He spun on a heelstrut and stomped toward the medical bay. They’d be landing soon, and he wanted to make sure his mobile medkit was fully stocked. Primus only knew what they’d find on Clandestine, and Ratchet wanted to be prepared.

If he felt Megatron’s gaze on his back, Ratchet pretended otherwise.

Clandestine housed a colony so large it had a landing pad for a ship the Lost Light's size. Which meant they wouldn't have to cram into the Rodpod, a fact which disappointed Rodimus and relieved everyone else. Instead, they set the Lost Light down on the runway. They weren't lacking for space.

Rodimus announced a free-for-all. Anyone could disembark if they wanted.

"Just remember," he'd said cheerfully. "Don't wander too far because if we need to leave in a hurry, I don't want to leave anyone behind."

Not that Ratchet suspected Rodimus actually would, but some of the crew probably believed him. No matter. There were few who wanted to explore the ruins of a colony, especially one so quiet and still.

Rumors of the energy eaters, vampires as they'd been named despite Perceptor's insistence otherwise, meant many of the crew preferred to stay aboard.

It was only about a dozen or so who chose to step foot on the dingy gray ground. Ratchet and Megatron were among them, of course. Perceptor and Brainstorm, who were both giddy in their own ways, and Nightbeat, whose optics shone with excitement at the possibility of solving a mystery. Rodimus, with Ultra Magnus looming over him like he intended to protect their often reckless leader. Skids and Nautica and Chromedome and Rewind, a little quartet of curiosity and guardian.

Buildings loomed in front of them, constructed of an odd mix of steel and stone, the latter shaped from the same gray particulate around them. The land was flat, with only a few rises in either direction, and a pair of suns shone down at them from opposite directions, their illumination distant and pale.

He felt the chill in the air. No wonder there was no organic life. There was nothing to sustain it here.

The landing strip was empty of ship. Docking clamps suggested there had been vessels here once. Ratchet suspected that they'd all launched when the energy eaters attacked. One of them might have even housed the scout ship they'd found once.

Ratchet went his own way from the group. They scattered throughout the ruins, though maybe ruins was the wrong word. The buildings weren't dilapidated, just abandoned. They showed a few signs of wear – cracked foundations, fading paint, rusted metal – but nothing worse than the buildings in the slums.

The silence was eerie.

Even more so when he took the main street down the center of the settlement where paved roads covered in grit crunched beneath his feet. The first crumpled frame startled him, made his spark pound in his chassis. A cursory examination revealed the mech was dead, and had been for quite some time. He swept a portable UV light over it, and found the telltale bites of an energy eater.

Multiple ones. Like he'd been overrun by a horde of them, perhaps drained dry in a matter of seconds.

It was horrifying.

In that moment, Ratchet wished he hadn't set off into the settlement on his own. Every quiet creak, quiet whisper of sound, put him on edge.

He rose from his crouch and peered down the street. More frames lay scattered across the ground, limbs twisted in a vain attempt at escape. He suspected that if he swept his light over all of them, he'd find something similar. It was as if a horde of energy-eaters had descended on Clandestine.

Ratchet moved into the nearest building, wondering what horror awaited him inside. It couldn't be worse than the bodies strewn in the streets.

He found himself in a lobby. A small desk crouched at the front and numbered boxes lined the walls to the left and right. Sloped ramps curved to either side of the desk, leading upward to a second level. An apartment complex perhaps?

More belongings scattered across the floor from those who'd fled in a hurry. There were blaster marks in the walls, cuts as well, evidence of bladed weapons.

A gray frame sat behind the desk, twisted in agony, bite marks visible in a sweep of UV light, some larger than others. It was the first frame Ratchet had seen with any kind of alt-mode kibble. Landing skids and blades suggested a rotary.

A dull thunk echoed from the back of the building.

Ratchet went still.

They'd yet to decide what exactly the energy eaters looked like. It was impossible to tell from the bite alone, and though there were many theories, no one knew for sure. Perceptor had found several old records, but even those had been vague and inconsistent.

The prevailing theory was that they had multiple limbs, multiple mouths, and likely, multiple sucker-like tentacles. Perceptor theorized they were the size of minibots at the least, given the size of the mechs they'd consumed.

Seeing the corpses on Clandestine, however, Ratchet wanted to revisit that theory. Perhaps they were small, like scraplets.

Another thump-rattled rose from the back of the building, through a door to the left of the right rampwell. It was louder this time, as though made by a larger beast.

Then again, maybe they came in a variety of deadly sizes.

Ratchet popped open his thigh compartment and pulled out his handgun. It had half a charge. Hopefully, that would be enough.

He should have grabbed another cartridge.

He had two options. He could make a run for it, or he could investigate. One was a distinctly Rodimus thing to do. The other would not answer any questions they had about what happened to the colony.

Ratchet glanced at the exit, back toward the door, and made his decision. He crept around the desk, hip against the edge of it, and slid toward the exit.

The far door burst open, the bottom edge screeching across the floor. Ratchet whirled toward it, spark thumping wildly. In the midst of a cloud of dust and noise, Ratchet heard coughing, and a large frame emerged. He lifted his gun to fire but a voice stayed his hand.

“That lock should not have been so strong!”

Large hands waved through the dust as Megatron came into view, face pinched with annoyance, his plating streaked in grime. He grumbled and kicked the door, and only then did he notice Ratchet.

Who was pointing a gun at him.

Megatron frowned and stared at him. “Are you so disgusted by our relationship that we’re back to the point where you feel the need to point a gun at me?”

Ratchet scowled. “I thought you were one of the creatures.” He tucked the gun back into his thigh. “What were you doing?”

“Investigating. Same as you.” Megatron came further into the room, peering into the shadows and nooks and crannies, as Ratchet had done earlier. “Ah, an apartment complex. I suspect we’ll find nothing but more ghosts.”

“That’s because there’s nothing here that’s any good for any of us,” Ratchet snapped, trying to soothe his ruffled armor and failing. His hands shook for Primus’ sake.

He’d survived the Cybertronian war. Why did this set him so badly on edge?

Ratchet turned his back on Megatron and stalked to the exit. “I’m moving on.”

“Shall I join you?”

Ratchet paused in the door frame – the remains of the thick transsteel crunched beneath his feet. The energon-eaters had probably burst through it.

“If it means you won’t scare the living daylights out of me again, by all means, join me,” Ratchet said, hoping he sounded sufficiently glib and not desperate.

It must have worked.

Megatron followed him out the door, and they started further down the main thoroughfare. The entire settlement followed an orderly architecture, with all streets leading toward the center. A low wall and massive flagpoles were visible in the distance.

Ratchet didn’t know what was more uncomfortable, the absence of life around them or the tense silence between Megatron and himself.

Clandestine carried the silence of a battlefield, after the last shot had been fired and retreat had been called, but there was little evidence of war. Had the entire city been overrun in a matter of seconds? Had the inhabitants no opportunity to save themselves?

They'd fled for their lives. The attack must have come upon them suddenly. Purchases lay strewn in the streets. Doors were wide open if they weren't shattered. Some had been attacked mid-flight, left to die in the roads, their frames locked in agony and desperation, reaching for escape.

It was silent. There wasn't even a breeze to stir the thin mesh flags hanging limp from their poles, their colors dulled by time and exposure.

Ratchet drew closer Megatron before he realized what he was doing and forced himself away. He had to break the eerie quiet before he went mad.

"Drift would've made some comment about how the aura of this place is drab and echoing with loss," Ratchet muttered.

He wasn't sure why his thoughts kept turning to Drift as of late. Perhaps because of the truth Rodimus had revealed. Or because Megatron's presence was too much like Drift's had been – a former Decepticon in their midst.

Megatron snorted. "That does not sound like the Deadlock I knew."

Ratchet gave him a sidelong look, and if it lingered on the stolen Autobot badge on Megatron's chassis, that was more the point. "Sometimes, mechs change."

Megatron abruptly paused and crouched beside a gray frame, collapsed facedown on the sidewalk. "Not like that, they don't," he said, and rolled the corpse over.

Like many of the others, this one had no discernible alt-mode. No wheels. No wings. No tracks. Nothing.

Was it a city of mostly monoformers? Was that why they had built this pseudo-colony so far from all the others? Were they less Knights of Cybertron and more of an offshoot?

It seemed all they were finding were more mysteries.

Ratchet stared down at his former lover and crossed his arms. "You know, funny you should say that, given your current circumstances."

"I am who I've always been." Megatron rose to his full height, limbs creaking, sounding more like he were Ratchet's age with every movement. "I'm only reclaiming myself. I was not sparked a killer. None of us were."

"And yet look what you've made us." Ratchet's shoulders hunched, a chill creeping under his armor. If it was the atmosphere or his own rapidly beating spark to blame, he didn't know.

They moved forward, their feet crunching over the ground, the noise echoing in the still quiet. Where the others had gone, Ratchet didn't know. Behind them, the Lost Light loomed over the settlement, a guardian too many centuries too late.

"That was out of necessity," Megatron replied at length. His gaze swept the roadway and the sidewalks.

He searched for something. Or perhaps he was counting the fallen, comparing it to some internal metric. Too few for a battle, too many for an accident.

Ratchet was guilty of the same cataloguing.

“It was out of fear,” Ratchet countered, and dared Megatron to argue otherwise. He hadn’t meant to embroil them in a philosophical discussion, but maybe it was inevitable.

It had been simmering between them from the moment Ratchet showed up at Megatron’s hab to end things. Or perhaps earlier than that. From the third time Ratchet ended up in Megatron’s berth and realized he wanted to keep trying.

Megatron turned to face him, and Ratchet should have continued without him, but he didn’t. They were on the precipice of something here. A culmination of the twisting, churning emotions thick between them for the past couple of weeks.

“Are not most desperate actions born of fear?” Megatron asked.

Ratchet twisted his jaw. “I don’t think Drift’s turn to Autobot was because of fear,” he ground out.

Though whether or not Drift’s defection was his own choice was still a matter up for debate, in Ratchet’s opinion. Oh, he felt Drift’s defection was sincere, but he was well aware Drift had the tendency to suborn himself to a stronger influence when the chance arose.

Megatron rolled his optics. “Of course it was,” he said, with the caustic tone of someone speaking to another who was particularly stupid. “Just as I’ve always been a disposable, raging against my cage, Drift or Deadlock or whoever he calls himself, will always be a mech desperate to belong.”

Ratchet almost flinched. That Megatron had so correctly diagnosed Drift hinted of a stronger relationship in their past, stronger than Drift had ever let on.

“Then what am I?” Ratchet demanded. “Since you’re so attuned to a mech’s secret desires and all.”

Megatron’s optics softened. “You,” he said, “are always trying to save someone. Except in the process, you tend to forget that sometimes, you need saving, too.”

Like a blaster shot to the spark. It wasn’t right, how accurate Megatron was. Like he could peel apart a mech’s chassis and rifle through their spark layers.

Ratchet snorted and stared hard at a building nearby, rusting on its foundation. “If that were true, I wouldn’t have a single spark on my hands. And I wouldn’t have betrayed every vow I ever took.”

“Necessity often trumps personal choice.”

“That sounds like an excuse.”

Megatron audibly cycled a ventilation. “It will always sound like an excuse, no matter what I say or claim,” he said. “You’re like the others, those who eventually tell me all the ways I should have responded, rather than addressing those who caused the hurt.”

Ratchet’s mouth snapped shut. He felt, more than heard, the accusation in Megatron’s tone. *Blame the victim*, Megatron all but screamed at him. *Blame me for reacting to pain and misery*.

Guilt clawed into his intake, and Ratchet swallowed it down. He would not be shamed into

defending Megatron's actions. "There are explanations, and there are excuses. Don't confuse the two," he snapped. "I never said you didn't have reason. Your methods were lacking, yeah, but never your reason."

"That's the thing about it, Ratchet." Megatron took a step closer to him, not out of threat, but so he could lower his voice, somehow make this conversation more intimate. "No method would have ever been safe enough. No method would have brought quicker results while mechs like me were dying, were murdered. There's a point where I went too far, I know that now, it's why I made the choice I made. But I will never stand here and tell you that every choice I made was wrong."

It would be so easy to lie and cast the first stone.

But Ratchet knew Megatron was right. Down to the smallest flicker of his spark, he knew Megatron had a point. Peaceful resistance would have only been quashed by the Senate faster than it could be built. If Megatron hadn't built the Decepticons into what they were, Cybertron would have continued on its steady course toward destruction.

Maybe Megatron had only hastened that end. Maybe it was inevitable. Ratchet didn't know. He wasn't an economist, a socialist, a historian. He was just a medic. He fixed mechs. Repaired them. Healed them.

Do no harm.

And once upon a time, in the midst of war, he'd abandoned every last one of his vows to save his own spark, and the sparks of others. He'd killed. He'd maimed. He'd prioritized injuries. He'd sent his patients out to their deaths.

He'd made choices.

Most of them, he'd make all over again.

Ratchet cycled a ventilation and turned away from Megatron. "We should keep moving," he said, his voice thin and reedy in the absence of ambient noise. "If we fall behind too much, Rodimus will gloat when he has to send out a search party."

"And we can't have that," Megatron drawled. He shifted, gesturing ahead of them, his expression carefully blank. "Lead the way, doctor."

Megatron let their discussion drop. How gracious of him. How indulgent. Or maybe, he was saving the venom for later.

It was impossible to know. Ratchet was no closer to understanding Megatron now, then he was before they fell into the berth together.

They walked in silence.

A familiar symbol came into view. Not the incomprehensible jargon of the knights, but one painted on Ratchet's very own frame. It was a medical center. Perhaps he could find some information on the creatures that had led this colony to its destruction.

The front doors, made of clear transsteel, had been completely shattered, likely by a press of citizens fleeing their deaths. Ratchet altered his course, and Megatron moved to follow him.

The air sizzled with tension. Again, Ratchet didn't know which was worse – this thing without a name or the taste of death in the air.

It was gloomy in the main lobby. There were fewer corpses than Ratchet would have expected, most of them pointed toward the door, as though they were running out of the hospital instead of into it. Not a good sign.

“Perhaps we should search elsewhere,” Megatron said.

“Are you afraid?” Ratchet asked as he took the first open door, pushing it fully aside with a creak of rusty hinges. More dim and gloom greeted him.

The ceilings were low, only a handsbreadth from the top of his head, which meant Megatron had to stoop to fit. Given the relative size of the corpses, Ratchet was not surprised. These knights seemed to be smaller as a rule.

“Fear is not the word I would use,” Megatron muttered. His crunched over the detritus littering the floor. “There is something unsettling about abandoned medcenters. Always has been.”

Ratchet snorted. “Never took you for the superstitious sort.” A set of double doors squeaked open, depositing them into what appeared to be an operating theater. An oddly positioned one, no less. This was not how Ratchet would have designed a medcenter.

There were no corpses here. Nothing but immaculate surgical equipment layered in dust. There was another set of doors beyond, probably recovery rooms. Some of the equipment wasn't recognizable or crude compared to what Ratchet employed.

“Superstition and caution often go hand in hand,” Megatron said, his voice echoing in the abandoned room. “Barring that, I've found that medical buildings are not always places of comfort.”

Ratchet thought of Pharma, of Delphi, and he had to concede Megatron's point.

He pushed through double doors on the far end, one hanging from a single hinge. It was indeed a recovery room, with two long rows of cubicles to either side. Curiously each had a locked door and the wall facing the corridor was windowed. Most were empty.

Two were not.

Ratchet did not know what happened to the mech in the first room, but the corpse resembled nothing like the others. This one appeared to have been... masticated, for lack of a better word. Torn plating, limbs at odd angles, wires hanging free, a look of agony on a face largely stripped of dermal plating.

Ratchet hurried on, nausea churning in his tanks.

“What in Primus' name is that?” Megatron demanded from behind him.

“Primus had nothing to do with whatever happened in that room,” Ratchet said. If he were at all religious, he would have said a prayer.

The next was even worse. The door hung slightly open as if inviting Ratchet to investigate further, and he stepped through as if on auto-pilot. The corpse was a balled heap on the floor, as if turned

inside out, and evidence of scorch streaking across his visible armor.

He looked like someone who had been made to transform over and over again, perhaps as a form of punishment. Perhaps he'd contracted a virus.

Ratchet crouched by the poor mech. He had tires – not a monoformer. The edge of a transformation circuit peeked out from the remains of the mech's abdomen, and it was a blackened, half-melted mess.

T-cog burn out indeed. Perhaps that was what had happened to the other as well. Ratchet wouldn't know for sure without an autopsy, but this mech looked to have suffered enough. He swept the corpse with the UV light.

No bites.

Megatron stepped up behind him. "And this one?"

"I'm not sure," Ratchet admitted, dread churning in his tanks.

The amount of monoformers. The unusual, almost tortured frame here and in the previous room. The energy eaters themselves. He didn't like it.

Ratchet ground his denta. "But it definitely doesn't look a frag thing like someone was trying to help him."

He pushed to his feet, spinning back toward the way they came.

"I need to find the records room." Ratchet pushed past Megatron, his spark feeling heavier and heavier in his chassis. To pervert a place of healing into this, it was unconscionable.

It was Pharma all over again.

"What are you talking about?" Megatron followed, and where before he had been making so much noise, he now moved with unnatural silence for a mech of his size.

"I have to know what they were doing here."

Ratchet stormed back through the surgical ward and back into the main lobby. He found a rampwell that went down and took it. He wished the lifts worked, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"How do you know where it is?" Megatron didn't have to follow, but he did. Ratchet didn't want to think about what that meant.

He passed the exits for one level and then another. He kept going. The dark closed around them, as though it had physical shape, until Ratchet's headlights and their biolights were the only thing to pierce it.

"Records are always kept in the basement," Ratchet said. Or at least he hoped that Clandestine's medcenter followed the standard construction. "In every hospital, on every planet, for every species I've ever visited, the records room has always been in the basement."

The rampwell ended at a single door. Plain. Locked with a physical key, but the lock so rusted it

only took a single kick to send the door bursting inward. His headlights illuminated a vast space empty of corpses. But then, who would flee to the basement where there was no escape?

“What do you think you’re going to find?”

“Answers.”

Ratchet couldn’t see the far wall because his headlights did not reach that far. But there were rows of personal consoles, no doubt for the data workers to sit and toil away, processing numerous lines of diagnostic code. They would have managed and maintained the records, cataloging, keytagging, et cetera.

Ratchet picked the nearest one and yanked out the stool, sitting down in it with a creak of ancient hydraulics.

“Ratchet, there’s no power,” Megatron said.

Ratchet jerked a handful of cables out of his wrist compartment and flicked through them, relieved to find that one to fit these ancient ports. Some things were still universal. He plugged into the computer and initiated a power surge, like jumping a dead battery.

The computer whirred to life.

“You can’t do that indefinitely,” Megatron warned him.

“I don’t need long,” Ratchet said as the screen flickered to life. “I want to copy the hard drive. I can’t even read their language. I’ll need Rewind for that. But I won’t leave until I have something to tell me what they were doing here.”

The filing system didn’t want to cooperate. It didn’t recognize him as a registered user. It kept throwing up firewalls.

Ratchet responded with permission codes, every single one he had in his archives, including one Optimus had given him, until the computer finally relented with a whimper. It allowed him access to the core system. He started copying.

“Why does it matter to you?”

Ratchet’s free hand rested on the desk, curling into a fist. The flicker of the transfer reflected back at him, the computer humming and whirring. “Because what I saw up there was not healing. It was torture.”

Megatron’s field spiked with unease.

“Haven’t you wondered why this settlement is so far from all the other coordinates? Why it’s the opposite direction from the Matrix map?” Ratchet watched the progress bar, counting down until he could disconnect. He felt dirty just being plugged into it, as if the horror could infect him somehow.

“I have. I’d assumed it was because the Knights were determined to colonize every sector of the galaxy.” Megatron scuffed the floor as he turned away, perhaps to investigate another corner of the records room.

Like the Decepticons once did? Ratchet thought, rather snide, but he kept it to himself. His unease made him snappish. He wanted to get out of here. His armor crawled, his spark beat faster, and he could have sworn something watched him from the dark, beyond where his headlights could reach.

“I don’t think that’s it,” Ratchet said, letting his voice fill the quiet rather than the echoing nothing. “I think they’re out here because they were exiled from the knights. Extremists maybe. I think that they are monoformers, so radicalized they disdained any alt-mode, even if it wasn’t their own.”

“Fanatics.” Megatron vented noisily. “Wonderful.”

“You’d know,” Ratchet muttered. Hadn’t Megatron worked very hard to create fanatical worshipers of his own?

Something whispered into the dark, a susurrus of sound that didn’t belong. Ratchet went still. The download continued, pushing past seventy-eight percent.

“What was that?” Ratchet asked, half-risen from his stool, his free hand on his thigh compartment.

“I heard nothing,” Megatron replied. His voice came from opposite the sound, perhaps too far to catch the whisper-quiet noise.

Shhh-hsssss-tmp.

There it was again. Ratchet’s head turned to the left, optics searching the dark, sensors straining. His spark pounded so hard it echoed in his audials.

“*That* I heard,” Megatron said.

“We’re not alone.” Ratchet’s fingers closed around his blaster.

Something burst out of the dark, something with fangs that gleamed in his headlights, and tentacles snapping out, aiming for Ratchet’s chassis. He fired, blaster lighting up the dark, making contact with the nauseating stench of burning organic, before the weapon was knocked out of his hands.

Frag.

Ratchet jerked back, but something wrapped around his other wrist, tugging him forward. He panicked as the stench of something dead, floated across his sensors. He twisted, yanking on the cable, reaching with his free hand for something, anything to use as a weapon.

“Ratchet!”

His fingers closed around the console, the monitor gleaming balefully at him. Ratchet grabbed and yanked, swinging it forward like a bludgeon, making contact. The thing holding him shrieked and hissed, an unearthly sound. Wetness splattered, hot and hissing, and Ratchet struck again and again. His cable jerked free of the computer, pulling the power supply, casting the basement into darkness save for the wild sweeps of his headlights. Whatever had him was long, tubular, like a dweller with multiple cables.

It didn’t matter what it looked like. Ratchet hit it again and again, trying to free his arm. He hooked the stool with his ankle and lobbed it at the beast. There was a dull, moist thud as it collided, and Ratchet’s arm was abruptly released.

He lost his balance and fell, hitting the ground hard. His head spun, processor working overtime. He heard a roar, didn't know if it was Megatron or the monster. His headlights flickered. Something licked at the bottom of his feet. The handle of his handgun glinted in the flickering lights.

Ratchet snatched up his blaster and rolled to his back, firing blindly at the beast illuminated by the sweeps of his headlights. It roared and hissed, massive body rearing back as more scorched organic stink filled the air. It thrashed and a nearby desk clattered across the floor.

Ratchet lurched to his feet and snatched up the stool again, just as he heard a shout and a large thump. Something hit the ground hard, and Ratchet didn't need light to know it was Megatron. He surged forward, lashing at the creature with his stool, firing blindly at the beast, pulling the trigger over and over again.

The monster keened, a horrendous noise. It flopped down, liquid spilling out of it, splashing over Ratchet's feet. He kept firing. He didn't know if the beast could pull itself together. He didn't know if it could be killed. His blaster ran out of charge, his fingers ached on the trigger. The stench choked him.

"Ratchet! It's dead!"

Arms wrapped around him, forcing his hands down, the empty blaster clattering to the floor. His back hit a warm chassis, a bigger frame pressed against him.

"It's dead," Megatron repeated against his audial, the purr of his engine soft compared to the arrhythmic revving of Ratchet's own. "It's not a danger to anything anymore."

Ratchet's vents heaved. Dots danced in his visual feed until he reset his optics. His hands felt cold and sticky. The stench of burnt fluid hung heavy in the air.

The creature lay crumpled in the beams of his headlights, a pulpy mass of flesh and bone and metal. Fluids seeped out of it – the telltale sludge of doubly processed energon and other liquids Ratchet couldn't identify. He didn't even know if it was organic, robotic, or some profane mix of the two.

Cables strewn limply across the floor. The mouth – agape – was full of teeth, but they could not have been what caused the bites. Perhaps the cables then. It was smaller than Ratchet expected, about the size of a minibot. In his terror, he'd imagined it larger.

It was very much dead.

Ratchet sagged into Megatron's embrace, his optics half-shuttering. "Primus," he breathed, and cycled several unsteady ventilations.

He hated himself for taking comfort in Megatron's arms. But more than that, he didn't want to pull away.

"It's all right," Megatron murmured.

"I know it is," Ratchet snapped. He'd lived through a centuries long war. A little beast in the dark should not have startled him.

"Even the strongest of us, react violently when cornered." Megatron stroked down Ratchet's side, his

field warm and soothing against Ratchet's. "It's only in the heat of the moment when our true selves are revealed."

Ratchet wriggled out of the embrace, shame and anger burning a hot-cold fire through his lines. Megatron had to ruin it, didn't he?

"Don't lecture me," he spat as he tugged a mesh cloth out of his subspace and wiped his hands free. "Don't use this opportunity to prove a point."

"You think of me as a monster." Megatron's gaze was steady. Splashes of fluids were painted garishly on his arms where he'd held Ratchet. "You see my actions as those of a mindless creature bent on destruction, acting only in rage, in fear. Maybe the latter is true." He looked at the remains of the beast. "That doesn't always mean it's wrong."

Ratchet growled. His face heated. He tossed the soiled cloth onto the floor, to join the rest of the mess. No one cared anyway.

"Fine," he said, and was alarmed to find his voice unsteadier than he liked. His fragging hands wouldn't stop fragging shaking either. "I'll give you that much. Now can we get the frag out of here already?"

Megatron turned away from him. "It wouldn't bother me in the least. This place has nothing but madness and ghosts."

"And if it's all the same to you, I'd like to avoid both." Ratchet stomped to the door, glad at least to hear Megatron following him. "We need to find the others, too. Warn them that there might be energy eaters lurking around."

He paused to wait for Megatron to catch up. For some reason, the former warlord was lingering by the corpse, giving it an odd look.

"It did not attack until we initiated the download," Megatron commented and started toward Ratchet with a shake of his head. "One wonders why. Did the knights employ them as guardians?"

"I doubt they're that trainable." Ratchet's headlights swept over Megatron as he got closer, and his optics widened. "Are you bleeding?"

Megatron grunted as he wrenched the main door open and held it aside. "For future reference, the beasts have a barbed, prehensile tail."

Ratchet hadn't noticed the tail. Given the flattened mess he'd made of the body, and the twisting coils of tentacles, he hadn't paid attention to the rest.

"Primus." Ratchet spooled his cable back into his compartment and moved to Megatron's side, taking Megatron's arm. "Come on. Let's get upstairs so I can patch you up."

"It barely counts as a wound."

"I'll be the judge of that."

Ratchet didn't ventilate easier until they were three levels up and back in the lobby. He closed all the doors so they'd have some warning if more of the energy eaters attacked, and then he dragged a

chair over, making Megatron sit on it.

“You’re too tall,” he grumbled as he examined the puncture wound in Megatron’s side. It steadily leaked energon, but Megatron was right. His self-repair should seal the tears soon enough. For now, a quick patch would do.

“I’m as tall as I need to be,” Megatron retorted. “Did you get the information you sought?”

Ratchet checked the download progress. He’d forgotten all about it. “Eighty-three percent.” He pulled out his medkit and got to work. “It’s enough to tell me what I want to know, though I suspect in the end, I’ll wish I hadn’t been so curious.”

“Do you think the residents here are responsible for the creatures?”

“No. I think they existed long before the knights came here.” Ratchet sopped up leaking fluids and slapped on the static mesh. “What were you thinking? Attacking that thing with no weapons, idiot. A few more centimeters and it could have gotten your fuel pump or your spark.”

Megatron gave him a baleful look. “Considering you went after it with a stool and a computer monitor, I don’t think you have any room to talk.”

“I had a blaster.”

“Which you lost.”

Ratchet snorted. “That’s not the point. Besides, you didn’t answer my question.” Mesh tape went over and around the edges of the static bandage, sealing it. The patch was ugly, but he’d worry about prettying it up later.

“If you have to ask why I attacked when I did, then maybe you’re right, there is nothing between us after all.” Megatron turned his head away, gaze focused on the far wall.

Ratchet paused, his fingers smoothing the last of the tape into place. “I suppose I owe you an apology then.”

Megatron’s hands curled around his knees “You don’t owe me anything. That much has been made very clear.”

“Damn it, Megatron.” Ratchet stood up, and was barely as tall as Megatron seated. “Why can’t you—”

“Why can’t I ‘what’? What do you want me to say, medic?” Megatron whipped back toward Ratchet with eyes as dark as coalfire. “That this has become something I desire? That I dream of you in my recharge? That I wake reaching for a frame that isn’t there?”

Ratchet’s spark skipped a beat. “Would it be true?”

How far would Megatron go? How many lies would he offer? Was it all just a game? Ratchet didn’t know, and it pained him, that lack of certainty.

“Of course it is!” Megatron snarled and leapt to his feet, whirling away from Ratchet, showing him the long, harsh lines of his back. His hands hung at his sides, curled into light fists. “I did not plan for

this. I did not anticipate this. Of all the scenarios I assumed, your presence belongs nowhere, and yet I still find myself trying to fit you into a plan I do not have!”

Ratchet swallowed over a lump in his throat. He packed away his medkit, his face hot, and his hands trembling.

He didn’t know the truth of anything anymore. He did, however, know that he couldn’t let things lie. Not as he’d left them before. Too much sizzled between them. It was a weakness either way.

“We need to talk,” he said quietly.

“The last time you said such a thing to me, it ended poorly.”

Ratchet focused on his packing. “I can’t say it will be different this time, not for sure, but what else do you have to lose?”

“You’ve already stripped me of my dignity. I suppose there’s nothing left.” Megatron glanced over his shoulder, his expression so neutral it might as well have been carved from stone. “Let’s go, medic. Before Rodimus decides to leave us behind.”

Ratchet stuffed his medkit back into his subspace and followed Megatron out the door. He left the rest of the ghosts behind.

~

Chapter 10

They emerged from the medcenter into the same flat, grey afternoon. They'd only been inside for a short while, but it felt longer. Megatron's side ached where the barbs had torn into lines and serrated the edges of his inner workings. He'd heal, but it wouldn't be fun.

He and Ratchet walked in step, Megatron unconsciously matching his longer strides to Ratchet's shorter one. They should have turned back toward the Lost Light. Instead, they paused outside the medcenter to catch their bearings.

Megatron didn't know if there were any bearings to catch. He felt untethered, to his frame and to this moment. Something heavy sat between them, and it was the only thing which kept Megatron rooted to the ground.

Like Starscream, he couldn't let things lie. He had to poke at an open wound, because Ratchet's expression was closed to him, and if Megatron were going to suffer in this state of wanting and not-having, then Ratchet needed to as well.

"There is one thing I find strange," Megatron said, glancing aside at Ratchet, taking notice of the gore staining the medic's frame.

Ratchet snorted. "Only one?" His gaze skittered around them, armor clamped tight, as though afraid of another attack. Given that his blaster was without a charge, he had right to be wary.

"Yes." Megatron set his shoulders. He pretended the buildings looming around them were of the utmost fascination. "I find it strange you were so willing to welcome Drift to the Autobots, that you readily forgave him, yet won't offer that same courtesy to me."

Ratchet vented, armor creaking as he rubbed at his forehead. "And I find it weird that you don't realize why that's totally different."

Megatron held his hands behind his back, though it pulled at the patched wound. He buried a wince. "Enlighten me."

Ratchet glanced at him, optics narrowed. "Deadlock was only a soldier. You were the Decepticon commander. It's an issue of responsibility." He started walking, but away from the Lost Light and deeper into the city.

Megatron followed.

"Just a soldier?" It was his turn to snort. What lies had Drift fed Ratchet? Or the Autobots, for that matter, in their quest to prove Decepticons could be tamed. "And you say I am a liar."

Ratchet slowed to a crawl. "What are you talking about?"

"Deadlock was no mere soldier." Megatron didn't bother to wipe the sneer from his face. Deadlock's loss under Turmoil's command was something Megatron had never forgiven Turmoil for. "He was one of my many captains."

Ratchet snapped to a stop, his feet scraping the ground. "Then why--"

“He served under Turmoil because, at the time, Starscream complained I was playing favorites, and I couldn’t afford a rift in my aerial forces.” Megatron faced Ratchet, wanting the medic to read the truth in his field and in his face. “Starscream framed it as a discrimination against aerial frames, and I made a concession. I always meant for Deadlock to return.”

Megatron had never forgiven Turmoil his failure or his betrayal. He had cost Megatron a great blow to his command structure. Sometimes, he wondered if that had not been Starscream’s intention all along, to deprive Megatron of a useful, loyal soldier. But then, Starscream couldn’t have known Turmoil’s envy would result in resentment toward Deadlock.

Or did he?

“Funny, that’s not the story as he tells it,” Ratchet retorted. He crossed his arms over his chassis, the energy eater’s gore standing out in sharp relief against his white and red paint.

Megatron cut Ratchet a sideways look. “Of course, Deadlock has always been the sort to go where the wind takes him. I have lost count of the number of times Soundwave requested to train him in infiltration.” To Deadlock, changing personas was as natural as ventilating. He could blend in with the best of spies.

“Are you trying to insinuate he’s not really one of us? He’s just pretending to survive?” Ratchet demanded. His field spiked then, full of anger and outrage and something else as well. Hurt perhaps. “That’s not going to win you any favors.”

Megatron shook his head. “Not at all. I’m just saying, Deadlock likely defected because he found it to be the best course of action, but as for becoming Drift, I’m sure he’s no more certain of what that is supposed to mean than anyone else.” He paused and cycled a ventilation. “But all of that is secondary to my initial statement: that you could trust his defection but not mine.”

“And I still say it’s different!” Ratchet snapped. His armor flared, his engine audibly revving. “He could have been your second in command for all I care, and I’d still trust him more than I trust you. I remember that kid before you tricked him.”

Tricked!?

Megatron opened his mouth to argue, but Ratchet barreled on, his field as oppressive as his tone. “You say he’s the kind to go with the flow, well, when someone tells you they can fix all your problems and you’re the lowest of the low, of course you believe them.”

Ah.

So Ratchet knew Deadlock when he was the Drift of the slums. There was history there. No wonder an underlayer of trust had already been present.

Megatron swallowed his outrage. When it came down to it, he couldn’t match history. Not when his own, to Ratchet’s optics, was steeped in blood and betrayal.

“Then the only Decepticon unworthy of forgiveness and a second chance, in your opinion, is me,” Megatron said, his spark spinning into a tiny ball. He wished, in that moment, he hadn’t started this course of conversation.

"I never said that," Ratchet growled. "I only said that I find it difficult to trust you, which would be logical for anyone to say! That's not going to change overnight, Megatron. Not for me, not for anyone."

Megatron pressed his lips together. "And yet," he managed, his intake feeling unexpectedly tight. "Somehow, I've managed to trust you."

"I can't help that." Ratchet sighed, his shoulders slumping. "I'm flattered and honored, but I'm not going to apologize because I can't return it so easily. There are some things you just can't rush."

"Ratchet!"

The shout drew both of their attention, cutting through the conversation like a vibroblade. Megatron followed the voice to find Rodimus standing on a nearby rooftop, wildly waving his arms. He was two or three storeys above them, but even with that distance, Megatron could read the glee on his face.

"We found something!" Rodimus shouted through his cupped hands. He then pointed ahead of them. "Just go through the gate!"

Ratchet rolled his optics and flicked his hand at Rodimus in understanding. "We have comms for a reason," he grumbled.

"That would be far too boring for Rodimus," Megatron said.

Sure enough, directly ahead of them was a gate, though it was not fortified. It looked more like a means to keep track of those coming or going, rather than one meant to keep from harm. It certainly hadn't done the latter. One side of the gate was twisted on its hinges, lying open. The other was bent in half, like something large had burst through it.

"What do you think we're going to find?"

"After what I've already seen, I don't dare speculate." Ratchet scrubbed at his face, shoulders sinking, suddenly looking older than he should.

He had a point.

Megatron didn't push.

They stepped through the twisted gates, scrape marks along the edges where something large had pushed its way through. Scraps of some material hung to the ragged bits. It opened into a wide, circular space, surrounded by tall buildings overlooking a vast courtyard. Or at least it would have been a courtyard, once upon a time. Now it was a giant pit with a ramp lining the inside, swirling steadily downward.

Most of their fellow explorers were crowded around the edge of the pit. Nightbeat and Skids were missing, but Megatron had no doubt they'd slipped into the pit to investigate further. It seemed like something they'd do.

"What is it?" Megatron asked.

"I have no idea," Ratchet replied.

They circled the pit, joining the bundle of crew on the other side. Everyone clustered around Perceptor and Rewind who seemed to be comparing notes.

“I think they were digging for energon,” Rewind said as he peered at Perceptor’s datapad and made notes on his own. “I’ve found geological surveys, chemical analyses, and radiation recordings that all back up the theory.”

“But they didn’t find energon,” Perceptor said with a frown. “They found those creatures instead. Perhaps lying in stasis, waiting for a potential energy source to stir them from their hibernation.”

Ratchet cycled a ventilation. “If they went into stasis, that would explain why we weren’t attacked until we powered up the computer.”

“Attacked?” Brainstorm echoed and leapt to his feet, almost jumping over Perceptor. “By a vampire? Did you bring me back a specimen?”

Megatron threw a thumb over his shoulder. “We left the corpse in the basement of the medbay if you really want it. Otherwise, me and Ratchet have splatters of it all over us.”

“I also took pictures.” Ratchet moved over to Rewind, crouching down beside him. “I have some information for you to translate if you can, Rewind. I want to know what else they were doing here.”

“Sure thing, Ratchet.” Rewind handed him a datachip without looking. “Load it onto here. I’ll run it with my translation program.”

“Thanks, kid.”

“Ratchet, I’m older than you,” Rewind reminded him though it was with amusement rather than irritation.

Ratchet chuckled and straightened, moving closer to the edge of the pit. He peered into it, and the sight of him leaning over the edge gave Megatron spark palpitations. He inched closer to Ratchet, thinking he might be sturdy enough to grab the medic before he fell.

“That’s a long way to the bottom,” Ratchet commented.

“Indeed.” Megatron’s insides churned. He had no wish to explore that dark pit, where he imagined there was nothing but miles and miles of low, twisting tunnels, shadowed and unstable. “So they were digging for fuel and found a nightmare instead.”

“They probably deserved it,” Ratchet said.

“Deserve?” Megatron echoed, and that tightening in his spark increased. “Is this what you’d call justice then? Do you look at me and imagine what worse fate I deserve?”

Ratchet’s head whipped toward him. He had a peculiar expression on his face, one Megatron couldn’t identify, but his armor ruffled. “Don’t start,” he hissed, glancing past Megatron, to their compatriots no doubt with hearing range. “This isn’t the time or the place.”

Megatron folded his arms. “I only asked your idea of justice. If it were up to you, Ratchet, what

punishment would you have given me?" He tilted his head. "I already know what most of our crewmates would say. They'd have been happier to see my spark, my head, and my t-cog all destroyed at once. Barring that, burying me in the deepest darkest hole for all eternity might have been a fair start."

"I'm not qualified to make that kind of judgment," Ratchet said and pressed his lips together in a thin line, his armor taut against his frame.

"It's not a matter of qualification." Megatron moved closer, lowering his voice to barely above a murmur. "You think me a monster, the worst villain, a spawn of Unicron, a creature of destruction. What would justice mean to you? My misery? My pain? My fear? My death?"

Ratchet shoved him back. "Frag you!" he snarled. "If your death and misery was enough to make up for all the pain you've caused, I'd have voted for it a thousand times over."

His voice echoed, perhaps even more so because the pit. It made the chatter behind them cease and draw curious stares. Which Ratchet noticed.

Color drained from his face, and he abruptly whirled, stomping away. His field, however, was not one of loathing, but one of struggle. Hate hadn't been in his optics when he'd snarled his answer. It had been conflict.

Megatron hesitated, weighing his options, before he decided he truly did have nothing to lose. It was already over with Ratchet, was it not? He couldn't destroy what was already over, but at the very least, he could get some answers.

"Then why?" he asked as they moved further and further from the very interested group of mechs, out of immediate audial range. "If you despise me so much, why did you ever say yes?"

Ratchet jerked to a halt, his back as hard and unyielding as a mountain, his vents coming sharp and quick.

"I don't hate you," he said, low and careful. "I never have. Hating. Loathing. Despising. It's all intent. It's all personal. And nothing you've ever done has been personal to me. In the grand scheme of things. I hate what you represent, I hate the choices you've made and I hate..." He broke off, head tilting downward, hands curling at his side. "I hate that, despite all of that, I still want you so much."

Megatron's mouth went dry. His spark stuttered, and took a moment to get back on rhythm. "Ratchet--"

"Stop." Ratchet held up a hand firmly. "Just stop, Megatron. I told you already. I'm not talking about this here. We'll discuss it later. Right now, I need space."

Space.

Megatron cycled a ventilation. "Very well. As you wish." He took a pointed step backward. "I won't follow."

Some of the tension eased from Ratchet's shoulders. "Thank you." He continued forward, without a backward look, and Megatron kept his word. He stayed behind, though he watched the resolute set of Ratchet's shoulders with something mingling hope and dread curling through his spark.

“What in Primus’ name was that about?”

Megatron did not jump, but it was a near thing. Rodimus’ voice from directly behind him was enough to startle anyway. “None of your business,” he replied and turned to face his fellow captain. “Is there something you need?”

“Yeah, like an explanation.” Rodimus craned his neck to see past Megatron, but Ratchet was moving at a fair clip, too far to be hailed. “What the slag did you do to our medic?”

“I did nothing. What you observed were the results of a private conversation, which I don’t feel the need to share.” Megatron turned and headed back toward the scientists and investigators – Skids and Nightbeat had returned. “Have we learned anything useful?”

Rodimus gave him a suspicious look but hurried to match Megatron’s stride. “Everyone’s dead. We didn’t find a single mech alive. And the only vampire we encountered was the one you and Ratchet killed. Rewind downloaded every archive he could find, but so far, all we’ve got are the same coordinates we picked up from the scout ship.”

“Pity.”

Rodimus snorted. “Yeah, right. Bet you’re congratulating yourself that we’re even more delayed now.”

Megatron cut him a look. “This sidetrip wasn’t my idea, if you’ll recall.”

“Oh, I remember.” Rodimus frowned. “What’s going on with you and Ratchet?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Looked a bit like a lover’s tiff to me. But that would be ridiculous.” Rodimus chuckled, but it sounded strained, especially when he lifted both his orbital ridges and gave Megatron a look.

He grunted. “I can’t help what assumptions you make.”

“Classic misdirection.” Rodimus danced out in front of him and started walking backward, which was liable to send him tumbling if he weren’t careful. Perhaps even into that deep pit.

Megatron resisted the urge to give him a helpful push.

Rodimus’ grin sharpened. “So tell me I don’t need to poke harder. Convince me.”

Megatron set his jaw. “There’s nothing to investigate. You may confirm with Ratchet if you wish.”

Rodimus made a face. “No, thanks. It’s just, you know, normally I’d point Drift in his direction.” His spoiler sank down, his gaze shifting elsewhere, before his optics focused back on Megatron, hard and defensive. “I don’t need you usurping my crew, Megatron.”

“Our,” Megatron corrected. “Co-captain.”

Emotion stormed across Rodimus’ face. “Don’t remind me.” He huffed and spun back around, stomping ahead of Megatron.

Trust Rodimus to end a conversation without actually ending it. And not making any kind of point with it.

Megatron rubbed his forehead and sighed a ventilation. Autobots frustrated him.

He left the scientists and the researchers to their babbled, excited chatting. Instead, he returned to the city. Ghosts and monsters were more his friends anyway, and the temporary patch job would hold.

It was better than sulking in the confines of the Lost Light. And it was far better than facing Ratchet and accepting the end for what it was.

~

They opted to stay on Clandestine for a week.

Opted was perhaps a strong word. Ratchet was one voice among many who insisted. He wanted to gather the fallen and give them more dignity than death where they lay.

Especially, he growled, any poor sots they found in the hospital.

Rodimus gathered up a hunting party to flush out and chase away or eliminate any 'estrix' as Rewind had found them called. He found an enthusiastic half-dozen of the crew and sent them on their way.

Rewind holed up in front of a console, plugged in at every available port, and doggedly poured through all the data he'd collected, much to Chromedome's concern. He alternated between pacing the floor behind Rewind, and trying to coax his conjunx away for a rest.

Megatron busied himself with helping gather the dead. Otherwise, he would have spent his time much like Chromedome, pacing, waiting for something to happen. Though he had visited the medbay, getting a more permanent repair to the wound in his side, without a single glimpse of Ratchet the entire time.

Time and space, Ratchet had said, for a conversation Megatron wasn't sure he wanted to have. Megatron gave Ratchet both, and now all he could do was wait. It was a perilous thing, waiting without knowing why or when.

He hated it.

Answers trickled in as they worked.

The knights here had dug too deep, unearthing the estrix as they slept, waking them from their stasis with the sweet smell of their energon. They'd tried to fight, but had been quickly overwhelmed. They'd tried to flee. Perhaps some had survived. Surely an estrix hadn't snuck aboard every escaping ship.

The estrix, they'd learned, were capable of surviving in space and deep space. They didn't need to breathe. They consumed energy in whatever form they could find it. They were much like the kremzeek, except they weren't made of energy alone. They were probably the result of some mad scientist playing with nature.

Some of the crew whispered of Jhiexus with sideways glances at Megatron. Never mind that Jhiexus could not be responsible for these creatures.

Ratchet, too, had his worst fears realized. As did Rodimus. These knights were knights no longer. They'd been exiled, expunged from the knights, for their beliefs. Alternative modes were a betrayal to Primus. They disdained their transformation cogs, and apparently, those who sought to keep theirs.

Ratchet was such a being of contradictions, Megatron mused as he sat by himself in the shadows of a creaky building. He guzzled coolant, head tilted back against the rusting wall. While he was part of a group gathering the dead, they were content to let him work alone, and he was content with his solitude.

Ratchet loathed the knights for their treatment of the poor mechs they found in the hospital – far more than the two Megatron had seen, their frames twisted and tortured, t-cogs blackened and burned. But he'd also insisted they treat the dead knights with dignity, something neither Autobot nor Decepticon had managed for their fallen during the war.

Stout atheist Ratchet was, and he claimed it had nothing to do with religion, though Cyclonus had agreed with him. Treating the dead with respect was a matter of course. Together, they were a force with which to be reckoned.

Megatron's sensors prickled.

He onlined his optics and lifted his head, scanning the dark shadows and crumbled ruins. He sipped at his coolant, watching over the lip of the bottle, the sense of being watched clawing at the back of his neck.

"You're getting better."

Agitation bled out of him in an instant. Megatron sighed and lowered his bottle. Ravage crouched in front of him, looking bland and uninterested.

"It must be some kind of proximity association," Megatron said. He eyed Ravage carefully. Their last conversation had not been a good one, and he hadn't seen the cassette since they'd parted on angry terms. "Are you enjoying our trip?"

Ravage snorted. "This place is vile." One paw lifted, briefly brushing over the tip of his nose. "It reeks. I'll be glad when we leave."

He stood and padded over to Megatron, pulling something out of a shoulder compartment. "Here."

Megatron held out a hand, and a small datachip tumbled into his palm.

"This is everything Rewind's translated about the knights from scout ship and the data that's been gathered here, including Ratchet's excursion into the medbay."

Megatron arched an orbital ridge. "I'm not going to ask how you acquired this." He tucked the chip away. He'd explore it in full later. "But I do wonder why you brought it."

"Information is the key to victory, isn't that what you always said?" Ravage sat back on his

haunches, regarding Megatron steadily, as still as stone.

“There is no victory here.”

“Victory is not always battle or war.” Ravage tilted his head. His gaze was as inscrutable as ever, and Megatron couldn’t shake the feeling that Soundwave looked out through Ravage’s optics. “I am not going to apologize.”

“You don’t need to. You were right.”

Ravage’s optics flashed. A flutter ran across his armor. “What?”

Megatron cycled a ventilation. He drew up a knee, resting his free arm across it. “I abandoned the Decepticons. I should have stayed, but I was a coward. I could not immediately see a path they would follow that wouldn’t push us back toward war. And in a moment of irrational thought, I didn’t bother to try. I feared that failure, on top of all the others.”

“Then--”

Megatron shook his head, cutting Ravage off. “You were right,” he said. “But I’m still not going back to the Decepticons. I can’t lead them. Not anymore. I represent far too much of what we don’t need to be.”

Ravage’s front claws kneaded the ground, little skritch-crunch of metal on metal. “You are our leader,” he said, quietly.

“I don’t know what I am, and that’s only part of the problem.” Megatron rubbed his free hand down his face. “I have to remember who I am first. Maybe then I can actually make a difference.”

The kneading stopped. Ravage lifted his gaze, his optics no longer burning with the resentment he’d carried for the past couple weeks. “And if by the time you’re ready, we’ve outgrown you?”

“Then so be it.” Megatron pushed to his feet, brushing bits of grit from his aft and legs. “The Decepticons deserve better, and if they decide it’s not me, then I have no right to protest.”

Ravage stood and turned, tail swishing behind him. “I’m not sure I like what you’ve become. Are becoming. You reek of Autobot.”

“There was a time Orion Pax stormed into the Senate and quoted my words at them.” Megatron’s memories dragged back, far back, to a point when he should have taken the hand offered to him, rather than slapping it aside. “When we stood together against the threat that was Zeta Prime, when in the optics of everyone else, Orion Pax was a Decepticon. Put that way, it’s all a matter of perspective.”

Ravage snorted. “I suppose you have a point.” His tail lashed again. He looked back over his shoulder, amusement in the curve of the dermal metal around his mouth. “Should I let you know if I find anything else?”

“Only if you want.” Megatron paused, hesitating, before he barreled forward. “I don’t need a subordinate, Ravage. But there’s plenty of room in my life for a friend.”

“Friend.” Ravage’s ears flicked and Megatron couldn’t tell if his tone was amused or touched.

“That’ll be a first,” he said, and bounded off into the shadows, leaving Megatron to his contemplations.

He supposed that meant they were no longer at odds with each other. How Soundwave would react to the news, Megatron didn’t know. He wasn’t even sure Ravage was still in contact with Soundwave, he’d assumed.

Either way, Megatron considered it a win.

He finished off the last of his coolant, and stretched his arms over his head, easing the kinks in his lower back cables. He might as well get back to work. The corpses wouldn’t gather themselves.

Thank Primus for that.

His system chirped with an incoming message. Megatron paused to acknowledge it, his orbital ridges lifting at the identity of the sender.

Ratchet.

He skimmed the contents before he went back and read them thoroughly, not that there was much to contemplate. It was an invitation. For the talk they needed to have.

Megatron’s spark spun anxiously.

Tonight it was.

He replied with an affirmative and left it at that. He had work to do. At least, he would have closure.

~

Ratchet had them meet on neutral ground, a rarely visited observation balcony on the thirteenth deck, just above the cargo hold. It was smaller compared to the observation deck, with only a few narrow windows, and vaguely reeked of spent transmission fluid and exhaust. It was one of the reasons no one used it, which meant they were unlikely to be disturbed.

There was only a single bench, and a row of small lights along the top of the narrow windows, making for gloomy corners and odd shadows. It reminded Megatron, strangely, of the mines.

They sat on the bench, facing opposite directions, their hips nearly in contact, elbows occasionally brushing. It wasn’t a very large bench. The most contact they had was between their fields, tentative though it was. The silence was weighted. Megatron refused to be the first to breach it.

He, after all, had not been the one to end things.

Finally, Ratchet sighed, like someone who had come to a realization and had resigned themselves it. “Fool’s energon is not what you think it is.”

That was not what Megatron expected.

“It’s nothing more than regular energon that’s been stripped of anything resembling flavor.” Ratchet’s shoulders sank further. “It doesn’t make you weaker. It doesn’t control your violent impulses. It doesn’t tame your anger. It’s a placebo.” Ratchet’s field drew away from his. “There’s no such thing as fool’s energon.”

Megatron’s vents rattled. His hands drew against his knees, wrapping around them, fingers trembling. Anger burned hot and fierce through his lines, his plating juddering.

“It was... a mind game?” he rasped, squeezing his optics shut, grinding his denta, trying to calm the broil of fury ripping through him.

Even now, Optimus humiliated him. Even now, Optimus hung over his shoulders like a rust infection, a gargoyle Megatron could not defeat.

Ratchet cycled a ventilation. “It was no game,” he said. “It was the only way, Optimus claimed. The only way to prove you were sincere without sending you off in chains and inhibitors. I protested, if only because we couldn’t obtain informed consent. You are who you are, but even murderers deserve that right.”

The world spun. It seemed harder and harder to ventilate. Megatron leaned forward, braced his elbows on his knees.

“When we started getting more serious, I realized I couldn’t lie to you anymore, especially when you wanted to explore certain kinks.” Ratchet’s ventilations became audibly ragged. His armor creaked as he shifted. “I’m putting myself, my crew, this ship, everyone in danger. I’m betraying the Autobots, the promise I made to Optimus, everything. Do you understand?”

“Not a game,” Megatron managed, strangled as it sounded. “A lie. A *test*. Even now--” He broke off, hands squeezing into fists.

A lie.

A *lie*.

Megatron had made an offer in reasonably good faith, and Optimus had responded with a lie, a test. He did not believe Megatron could change. No. Instead he lied.

It was one thing to be shackled by their invisible chains, of which he’d given something like consent for, but to learn he’d been shackled by a cage of his own making? It was unconscionable.

Megatron jerked to his feet, wobbling on unsteady knees. “I have to go,” he said, the room suddenly too small, too hot, too suffocating. He spun around the bench, heading for the door.

Ratchet lurched up. “Megatron, wait.”

And then there was a hand around his wrist, tight enough to be noticed, tight enough to feel like bonds, and Megatron whirled, jerking his arm free. He didn’t know what look he had on his face, but it made Ratchet flinch, made him shift a half-step back before he set his jaw and held his ground.

“Wait?” Megatron demanded. His vents heaved. “Wait for what? Another lie? For you to shatter and stomp on what remnants of trust I foolishly carried for you?”

Ratchet flinched, but he held firm.

“For my apology.” Ratchet sank back down to the bench, but it forced him to look up at Megatron. “I’m sorry. Not for the lie, that was necessary orders, but for the way I ended things. You deserved more than the answer I gave you.” He paused, worked his jaw. “You deserved an honest explanation.”

Megatron stared at him. Even more than the fool’s energon, the last thing he expected was an apology from Ratchet.

“What does that even mean?” Megatron asked. Nothing made sense anymore. The worldview as he’d crafted it had lies for a foundation, and the walls stood on shaky ground.

“It means exactly what I said. I’m sorry. At the very least, I should have been honest with you about my feelings.” Ratchet looked contrite. He rubbed his hands down his thighs and offered a thin smile.

Megatron didn’t return it. “Is that it?” Thoughts crashed one against the other, like atoms untethered in a vacuum.

“It?” Ratchet tilted his head.

“You tell me the truth about your lie, and you apologize for being a selfish aft, and that’s it?”

Ratchet met his stare evenly. “If that’s all you want it to be.”

“Quit being cryptic, medic!” Megatron snarled. He slashed a hand through the air, the urge to strike, to fight back against the agony, something he had to swallow down. Because the fool’s energon was a lie and all he had was his own restraint.

Megatron continued, demanding, “Say what you mean for once. I’m done playing games with Autobots.” Horrifyingly, his vocalizer crackled, betraying the churn of emotions in his spark.

Ratchet’s expression turned thunderous, for all that his voice stayed even. “Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

Megatron slapped a hand over the badge on his chest. “You know very well what I meant.” He scowled. “But if you prefer your mysteries, then I’ll walk away right now, and you can bet I never answer your comm again. If that’s what you want, so be it.”

Ratchet ground his denta, cables flexing in his intake. “Do you still want a relationship with me?”

“I thought we didn’t have one to start with.” Megatron’s hand slipped from his chassis, revealing his Autobrand once more. He felt bare in ways he’d scarcely felt before.

“Is that my answer?”

Megatron sighed and dropped down next to Ratchet, though this time they were at least facing the same direction. “You frustrate me.” He stared at the far door, halfway contemplating a quick escape, while his spark urged him to stay.

Ratchet had lied to him. He’d participated in the falsehood. Had probably snickered to himself while Megatron gulped down that foul tasting energon under the mistaken belief it earned him points on the

road to redemption.

He should walk away now.

Instead, he worked his intake and admitted, "You are not in my plans."

Ratchet snorted. "No kidding."

"Not that I ever had any which were concrete." Megatron worked his jaw, head dipping to glare at the floor. "You asked me if I were sincere. And the answer has always been: as sincere as I can be. I'm more than aware of my position. I know I walk a razor's edge. Yes, I have plans, but nothing set in stone. And none of them involve returning to war or the Decepticons."

Silence greeted that admission. Until Ratchet slid nearer to him, closing the distance, their hips and thighs touching. "I want to trust you," he said. "Against all odds, against my own guilt, I want to believe you want to change. I have to believe or else..."

"Or else you can't even begin to try being with me."

"Yes."

Megatron wondered if the hypocrisy burned at all. "There's nothing I can say that will convince you." He nodded slowly, lips pressed together, thinking now was the time he should get up and walk away. He'd been lied to. He'd been tricked.

He didn't deserve much, but he certainly didn't deserve that.

His aft stayed planted on the bench. He wanted, against all odds.

And what, he noticed, and what of the trust Ratchet had broken in him? What of the cruelty? Was Megatron expected to swallow it down, forgive without question?

"No, there isn't." Ratchet paused before he rested a hand on Megatron's thigh. The weight of it was warm. Welcome. Familiar. "So that's where the trust comes in. I trust you're sincere, and if you're still interested, you trust me to tie you up. It's all the same."

Megatron's engine gave a little rev in memory, despite the tension. "Is this you agreeing to try?" He hoped he didn't sound as hopeful as he felt.

"It's me saying that things aren't black and white. They never have been, and the last thing I should do is let my past – or yours – dictate what I should do with my future."

Ratchet patted Megatron's thigh and lifted his hand away.

A moment passed. A cycling of ventilations.

Megatron braced his elbows on his knees, lacing his fingers together. He stared hard into the dark, his spark struggling with indecision. There was too much hesitation in Ratchet's words for his comfort. Too much of Ratchet playing word games because he was unwilling to put anything on the line in the same way Megatron had.

"And what if..." He hesitated, wondering if he asked for too much, if he didn't even deserve this much courtesy. "What if that's not enough for me?"

Ratchet startled, his field spiking. “What do you mean?”

Megatron turned his head, forcing his face into a mask of neutrality. “I forgive you the lie about the Fool’s Energon. I understand the necessity of it, as much as I loathe the trick Optimus played on me.” His vents rattled. “What if I’m the one who can’t trust you?”

“I’ve already apologized,” Ratchet said, his orbital ridges crinkling. He pushed to his feet, and there was agitation in the way he shifted his weight. “I don’t know what more else I can do about that.”

Megatron’s engine growled a low tone. “I don’t want another apology.” He looked up at Ratchet, though not too far thanks to their size difference.

Ratchet scowled. “Then what do you want? I’m not a fragging telepath. I can’t pluck it out of your mind. I can’t guess.”

Megatron wiped a hand around his mouth, alarmed to find his fingers trembling a little. He didn’t know if he deserved this, but he didn’t know he could continue in this relationship without it. Not after what they’ve learned about one another. Not after knowing what he wanted from Ratchet.

He needed... reassurance. Confirmation. He needed to know he wasn’t the only one invested in this.

“I want to hear you say it,” Megatron said, and perhaps he was too quiet, because there wasn’t an immediate answer. Just the low rasp of sharp venting.

He didn’t want to look into Ratchet’s optics, for fear of the rejection he’d find there, but he did it anyway. He gained a new boldness, a new strength, when he did so. He was Megatron, former leader of the Decepticons, once a miner who rose above his station. He had been feared and admired.

He could do this.

He *deserved* this.

“Tell me what I mean to you,” Megatron said, louder this time, so there could be no mistake. “Or that’s it. I will walk away from you, and I won’t look back. No more apologies. Nothing. We’re done.”

The scowl deepened, but there was panic in the back of Ratchet’s optics, making them flare. “You’re giving me an ultimatum?” His hands fisted at his sides.

Megatron shook his head. “I’m giving you a choice. You already know how I feel.” He’d said it so many times, perhaps not in such clear words, but it was obvious enough. “You’re the one who keeps trying to walk away. So I want to hear it.”

Ratchet’s intake visibly worked. He dragged a hand down his face, looking off to the side as though he couldn’t meet Megatron’s optics. “I want to be with you,” he managed through gritted denta. “I thought that was obvious. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“That’s not enough.” Megatron pushed to his feet, there being only a few feet between them now, and he looked down at Ratchet. “I won’t accept assumptions.” His field slashed the air between

them, turning it a vibrant shade of emotion. “*Say it.*”

Ratchet jerked like he’d been struck. “I fragging like you,” he snapped, and his palm smacked against Megatron’s chestplate, right over his Autobot badge. “There! Are you happy? I like you.” His vents heaved, and his vocalizer crackled as he looked up at Megatron with bright blue optics.

“I think about fragging you. And recharging with you. And talking to you. And just being with you. I think about... about...” He trailed off, engine revving, stumbling over his words, and his field flared again, panicked but honest.

It was enough.

Primus, it was enough.

Megatron grabbed Ratchet, pulling him into an embrace. Ratchet’s mouth snapped shut. He trembled in Megatron’s arms, clutching his sides like he needed the lifeline. Alarm rang in his field, like a secret shoved into the light.

But he didn’t take it back.

“I fragging like you, too,” Megatron murmured.

Ratchet snorted something that might have been a laugh. “I hate you,” he said, but it was defeated, a joke.

The line between the two was often so thin as to be transparent.

“I know.” He stroked Ratchet’s back, gradually feeling the medic relax against him, as something within Megatron uncoiled and loosened.

“And I am sorry,” Ratchet said with an audible sigh and a sinking of his shoulders. “A certain someone reminded me I should treat you as an individual first, and a former Decepticon second. It took me too long to absorb that lesson.”

Megatron pulled back and cupped his face, urging Ratchet to look at him. “Apology accepted.” He swept his thumbs over Ratchet’s cheeks. “I can’t promise I’m ready for our other activities, but--”

Ratchet shook his head within Megatron’s grasp. “Yes, I get that. Trust is hard to earn back.”

“But not impossible.” Megatron held his chin and bent down, pressing their mouths together, kissing him slow and gentle.

Like lovers do, like the lovers they are.

He ended the kiss with a nuzzle and captured Ratchet’s hand, lacing their fingers together. Ratchet looked at him curiously until Megatron lifted Ratchet’s hand to his mouth, kissing his knuckles. “Do not lie to me. Not again.”

The anger was not gone. It was still present, like a low simmer in the depths of his spark. But it was not insurmountable. It was bleeding into hope instead, the feeling of something new, something better on the way.

“We don’t lie to each other,” Ratchet agreed, the back of his hand stroking Megatron’s lips, his expression softening. “The rest we can figure out as we go. Talking about things, you know, like a couple of reasonable mechs.”

Megatron snorted. “Since when do either of us qualify as reasonable?”

“Now’s a good time to start.” Ratchet’s field reached out, tentative at first, but gaining in strength as it nudged against Megatron’s.

He didn’t even have it in him to resist, relenting to the nudge and letting Ratchet’s field wrap over and around him. Warm like an embrace. Faintly tingling, on the edge of arousal and affection both. He swore he could sense Ratchet’s sparkbeat in it.

He wanted to keep Ratchet into his arms. He wanted to press their lips together, again and again. He wanted to hold Ratchet like he hadn’t in weeks, to press his audials to Ratchet’s chestplate and listen to the steady beat of his spark.

He wondered if it could last. Would the lies be too much? Would their past only be a noose? Would Ratchet ever see beyond the things Megatron had done?

It was impossible to know for sure.

“I’m not perfect,” Megatron murmured, his ventilations hitching. “I’m going to make mistakes, Ratchet. I’m going to say or do something that you’ll disapprove of. What then?”

Could he trust Ratchet not to have another moral eruption and decide they needed to end things for the sake of his own ethical boundaries?

“We cross that bridge when we come to it.” Ratchet rolled his shoulders in a shrug, but his finger still stroked Megatron’s lips. “No one’s perfect. I don’t expect you to be on your best behavior. I just... want to know that you’re trying.”

“I don’t know how to prove that.”

Ratchet’s fingers rested under his lips, his optics soft and gentle. “You can’t. I can’t either. We’re just going to have to try this trust thing all over again.” He leaned in closer, their armor a handsbreadth apart, his frame tangibly humming. “We’ll learn as we go. Both of us.”

Was it hope, this fragile thing curling inside of him? “You mean it then.”

Ratchet’s lips curved into a soft smile. “I do.”

Primus. This was a terrible, terrible idea.

Which was probably why Megatron wanted it so badly. He wanted something he could mark as real, something he could put his faith into, something that would bring him peace, and if he was lucky, happiness.

He wanted *Ratchet*.

“All right,” Megatron relented, a soft sigh escaping his vents, armor creaking as it loosens from the tight clamp he hadn’t realized he’d gained. “Then what’s next?”

“Next, if I’m lucky, you’ll kiss me again.” Ratchet chuckled and reached up, curling a hand around the back of Megatron’s neck as if to tug him down within reach. “After that, we can see where the rest of the day takes us. Because I’m off-shift, and I think you are, too. And we have some catching up to do.”

Megatron groaned, low and deep, and hauled Ratchet tight against his frame. Their armor collided, metal on metal, Ratchet curving against him in the right places.

He held himself back from crushing their mouths together. It took effort to stay gentle, but Megatron ensured it. He could be sweet, he could be trustworthy. He could brush his lips over Ratchet’s, tasting him first, before he brought their mouths together, glossa teasing the seam of Ratchet’s lips.

Ratchet shuddered and melted against him, his field robing Megatron in a dizzying prickle of relief and need. He hummed, the sound hungry. He clutched at Megatron, sliding closer, opening his mouth to Megatron to deepen the kiss. He tasted sweet, like he’d recently consumed a delicious energon, the kind of which Megatron should be allowed now.

The anger over the lie still burned inside of him. It was one of many, many long conversations he and Ratchet would have. But later.

For now, there was this simple thing. An embrace. A kiss. A promise of a potential future, if they survived the reach of this quest anyway.

It was enough. It was more than enough. It was a start, starting over.

Megatron never could have believed, after all he’d done, that he’d get one of those.

* * *

Chapter 11

Ratchet loitered outside the office Ultra Magnus had claimed for himself for five minutes before he gathered the courage to press the chime.

The door opened immediately. Ratchet eased inside, found Ultra Magnus crouched behind a desk much too small, bent over a stack of datapads and frowning at them. He didn't look up. Probably didn't get much visitors here.

Ratchet didn't ask if Ultra Magnus was busy. He knew the answer to that.

"I'd like to turn myself in for disciplinary action," Ratchet said as he dropped heavily into the chair opposite Ultra Magnus, fiddling with it for a moment to make it adapt a shape best suited to his frame.

Ultra Magnus stilled and lifted his head. "Beg your pardon?"

"Disciplinary action. Me." Ratchet rolled his shoulders and tried to effect an air of ease. He wasn't sure he succeeded. "I'm making it easy for you."

Ultra Magnus cycled his optics. He set down his stylus. "Alright," he said, cautiously. "Might I ask why?"

Ratchet smoothed a hand around his mouth. He cycled a steadying ventilation. It was a good thing Ultra Magnus was already seated.

"For not only starting and continuing a relationship with Megatron, but also revealing the true nature of fool's energon to him," Ratchet said. "To start."

Ultra Magnus stared at him. For a long moment, he said nothing. His field tentatively touched Ratchet's, as though trying to feel out the truth, before it retracted.

Ultra Magnus laced his fingers together and folded them on top of the desk. "Rodimus owes me his undivided attention for a week," he said at length.

It was Ratchet's turn to blink. "What?"

Ultra Magnus' expression remained unreadable, but the corner of his mouth twitched. "Ratchet, I may be blind when it comes to many things, and my ability to read a social situation is passable at best, but I have noticed the growing relationship between yourself and Megatron. So this comes as no surprise to me."

He paused, lips pursing into a frown, and cycled a heavy ventilation. "Though you taking it upon yourself to put the crew in danger by revealing the truth about the fool's energon is troublesome."

Ratchet, for his part, gaped. "You knew?"

Ultra Magnus nodded slowly. "I know now. I suspected before." His lips formed a grim line. "Rodimus, of course, thought I was losing my processor. He actually suggested I have First Aid run a scan. Thus the wager."

Ratchet searched for words, and couldn't think of a blessed one. He didn't know which was worse. That he and Megatron were apparently not as discreet as he'd thought. That Ultra Magnus tacitly approved of their relationship. Or that Magnus had taken the stick out of his aft long enough to make a wager with Rodimus.

One he'd apparently won.

"I think I shall relish the 'I told you so' for many months to come," Ultra Magnus added with an air of fond amusement.

Ratchet coughed in his intake and gathered his wits back around him. "Should I consider that approval then?"

"Approve is not the word I'd use." Ultra Magnus' shoulder stacks twitched, armor fluffing and resettling around his frame. "But in terms of disciplinary action, I cannot honestly conceive of a punishment to suit your transgression. I'd strip you of your rank, but you've already passed it to First Aid. Supposedly."

Ratchet couldn't decide if Magnus' frank tone was eerie or a relief. He felt as though he'd slid into some sidealong dimension where nothing made sense anymore. Including the fact he actually wanted to try a relationship with Megatron.

He shifted, the chair shifting with him. "Then I'm not going to be punished?"

A cable in Ultra Magnus' jaw twitched. "Ratchet, the very purpose of punishment is to deter someone from repeating an action in the future. And while beginning a relationship with Megatron is perhaps in poor taste, there's no rule against it."

Poor taste? Primus, Ratchet couldn't tell if that meant the idea of it made Ultra Magnus' nauseous, or if he disapproved but couldn't bring himself to say it. Or if it was some thin reference to the fact Megatron was who he was and no one should desire a relationship with him, least of all Ratchet.

It was surreal.

Ratchet stared at Ultra Magnus.

The former Duly Appointed Enforcer of the Tyrest Accord cycled a ventilation. "However, that doesn't mean there aren't consequences for your actions."

"Consequences for fragging Megatron?" Ratchet arched an orbital ridge. "I thought the never-ending guilt-trip was it."

Ultra Magnus rubbed his forehead. "Consequences for putting the Lost Light in danger," he corrected. He frowned, deep and stubborn. "You've taken the leash off someone who is capable of great and terrible things."

There it was. The guilt he'd mentioned. It clawed up out of his tank, took root in his spark, and knobbed up his intake. It threatened his ventilations, reminded him of his own selfishness.

"You don't think he's sincere?" Ratchet asked. Because clearly his own judgment was compromised and had been for quite some time.

“I think he’s played at peace before.” Ultra Magnus unfolded his hands and leaned back. He reached for a datapad, fiddling with the attached stylus. “I’m cautious,” he said, his tone as careful as the word he’d selected.

Ratchet tipped his head. “Fair enough.”

Ultra Magnus’ gaze flicked up to him and then fell to the datapad, skittering, as if uneasy. “And he’s your responsibility now.”

Ratchet’s vents stuttered. He blinked. “Come again?”

Ultra Magnus spread his hands. “You trust him enough to put the safety of the crew, the quest, this ship at jeopardy. If anything should happen, you’ll share the blame. That is, if any of us survive long enough for an ‘I told you so.’”

Ratchet swallowed over a lump in his intake, the weight of Ultra Magnus’ words sitting heavy on his shoulders. “Understood.” He cycled a ventilation, hoping the jitter of his internals wasn’t audible. “I appreciate your lack of moral judgment, Magnus.”

“You’re good for each other,” Ultra Magnus said, his tone perfectly bland. “Whatever I think about Megatron, if it’s an act or not, I’m seeing improvement. And I’m going to hope it’s sincere. For our sake and yours.”

“Yeah, me too.” Primus, this was such a bad idea. But it was too late to back out now.

Ratchet patted the arm of his chair and made a motion to rise. “Well, next on my list is Rodimus.” And after the joy of this conversation, Ratchet couldn’t wait to see what juvenile or furious comment Rodimus had to offer.

Or how much he’d immediately round up a lynching squad and go after Megatron, certain it was all Megatron’s fault in some way.

“Oh, please. Allow me.” Amusement danced in Ultra Magnus’ optics, and was that a twitch on the corner of his lips? An almost-smile. “After all, there is the matter of our wager.”

Ratchet managed a small smile himself. “Well, I’d hate to deprive you of something so entertaining. Be my guest.” He edged around the chair, backed toward the door, and hoped it didn’t resemble a retreat.

“And Ratchet?”

He paused before he could escape. “Yes?”

The almost-smile lingered on Ultra Magnus’ lips. “Good luck.”

Ratchet snorted. “Thanks.”

He was certainly going to need it.

Ratchet returned to his quarters in a daze. He was sure he passed others in the corridors, but their faces were blurred to him, their comments like static. He had approval from Ultra Magnus of all

mechs. It wasn't absolution, but the closest thing to it.

He felt as though he'd walked blind through a field of landmines, and somehow managed to avoid each and every one.

He'd left Megatron recharging in his berth. But it's no surprise Megatron was awake by the time he'd returned. He hadn't moved far. Propped up on the berth, a datapad in one hand while the other arm folded behind his head, he looked the picture of ease.

Delectable ease.

Ratchet stared at him for a long moment, caught between the oddness of his conversation with Ultra Magnus, and the desire he suddenly felt for the murderous warlord in his berth.

Crimson optics acknowledged him. "How'd it go?" Megatron asked.

Ratchet paused and ran through a gamut of replies

"Ultra Magnus has a sense of humor," he settled on and stood at the foot of the berth, admiring the splay of Megatron across it.

Tempting.

He could do something with this.

Megatron snorted a laugh. "Is that so?"

They weren't quite relaxed with each other. Not that they'd been before their argument. But there was a certain simplicity now. Like they'd finally confronted the combiner in the corner, acknowledged it was there, and decided they'd just have to deal with it. The combiner continued to linger, looming over them, but they had a plan.

"Um hm." Ratchet considered the trunk of toys beneath his berth. A scenario unfolded at the back of his mind. "Were you aware he and Rodimus had a bet regarding our relationship?"

Megatron lifted an orbital ridge. "I didn't know Ultra Magnus was capable of making wagers."

"Neither did I." Ratchet leaned forward, admiring the shape of the responsibility reclining in front of him. The menace he knew lurked beneath the armor. The intelligence sharp and guarded behind red optics.

He braced his hands to either side of Megatron's knees. Sometimes a fusion cannon was just a fusion cannon apparently.

Either way, it was a deadly weapon.

Ratchet cycled a ventilation and caught Megatron's gaze. "Tell me you understand what I just did."

Megatron tilted his head. He set the datapad aside, giving Ratchet his full attention. "What was the punishment?" he asked, tone quiet. Grave. At least he comprehended the gravity of the situation.

"None," Ratchet said, and put fake cheer into his voice. "Unless you count the fact I am now directly

responsible for your actions. Good *and* bad.”

Surprise flickered in Megatron’s field. He pulled himself fully upright, one ankle drawing up to tuck under the opposite knee. “Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice.” Ratchet straightened and moved around the berth, leaning his hip against the edge. “When I told you the truth about the fool’s energon, I chose to believe in your sincerity. If you go down, I’m going with you.” He huffed a laugh without humor, the grim nature of the situation burbling in his spark like clotted energon.

Megatron swung his legs over the edge of the berth, and when Ratchet moved, he trapped Ratchet between his knees. “You trust me.”

“I don’t even trust myself anymore.” Ratchet scraped a palm down his face, ex-venting noisily. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know if I’m making a mistake. I don’t know if this makes me selfish. I don’t know anything.”

He could have kept the truth to himself, rather than admit such weakness to Megatron. But Ratchet was tired. Of fighting himself. Of pretending he didn’t care. Of holding on to his grump because it was all he had left.

The war was over. He desperately wanted it to stay that way.

Firm fingers wrapped around his wrist, pulling his hand away from his face. “You trust me,” Megatron repeated, his tone lower, firmer. “I won’t betray that trust, Ratchet. I don’t wish to return to war. I may not quietly submit to a cage or execution, but I don’t want to return to the status quo.”

“I guess time will tell,” Ratchet said, his hands landing on Megatron’s thighs, right above his knees. Heat warmed his fingertips.

“You trust me,” Megatron murmured, like a broken recorder, stuck on the same track over and over again.

Ratchet rolled his optics. “Yeah, and it’s probably one of the stupidest things I’ve ever done.” He squeezed Megatron’s knees in warning, to prove he shouldn’t be taken lightly, no matter what emotions grew in his spark. “I swear to Primus below if you betray us, betray me, I will cut your spark out myself. With surgical precision. Don’t think I won’t.”

“I believe you.” Megatron’s knees slid inward, trapping Ratchet’s hips between them. “And now I think I’m going to kiss you.”

“What? Are you asking permission?”

Megatron chuckled. “Sometimes, I think it’s better if I do.” He tugged Ratchet closer and slanted their mouths together, his glossa teasing the seam of Ratchet’s lips.

Ratchet opened to him, swallowing a moan, arousal swirling hot and tight in his tanks. It raced down his spinal strut, burning away the anxiety running like ice through his lines. Megatron’s glossa touched his, the kiss deepening even as it remained soft. Romantic if Ratchet had to put a description on it, though romance had never been part of the picture for them. Because it’s not a relationship. Or at least, it wasn’t.

It was now.

“Mm. If only I didn’t have to be on shift in an hour,” Megatron said against his lips, his field rolling over Ratchet’s with hot intent.

“An hour’s more than long enough,” Ratchet scoffed.

A mouth nibbled on the curve of his jaw. “Not for what I want to do to you.”

Ratchet’s hands slid up, until his thumbs framed Megatron’s interface panel. “But it’s plenty of time for what I have in mind,” he purred as he nuzzled into Megatron’s intake. “There’s a little game I want to play.”

“Go on.” Megatron slid a hand around Ratchet’s side, toying with a thick armor seam.

Ratchet nibbled on a cable, the rumble of Megatron’s vocalizer against his lips. “It’s more of a wager.” He brushed the pad of his thumb over Megatron’s valve panel, grinning as Megatron’s ventilations hitched. “A test of your endurance.”

Megatron groaned, and his armor rippled. “I’m half-afraid of what your devious mind has conjured, but I do enjoy a challenge.”

“I thought you might say that.” Ratchet nipped Megatron’s intake and then forced himself to draw away.

He crouched and pulled out the crate beneath his berth, rummaging through it for the item he sought. It paid to be organized. He found it quickly and stood, holding the vibrator between two fingers as he showed it to Megatron.

“This goes in your valve,” Ratchet said as he planted his free hand on Megatron’s thigh.

Crimson optics focused on the toy, spiraling in and out, his field spiking with desire.

“But only I have the control,” Ratchet continued. He slid his hand upward, fingertips grazing over Megatron. “If you don’t beg me for relief by the time your shift is up, then you win.”

Megatron’s glossa swept over his lips. His gaze slanted toward Ratchet. “What do I win?” He plucked the toy from Ratchet’s hold and turned it around and around in his fingers.

“A favor of the most erotic kind. Free of charge, of course.” Ratchet rumbled a laugh and leaned in, brushing his lips over the curve of Megatron’s jaw. “But if you beg me for an overload, and I’m quite sure you will, then I win the prize.”

“It’s only pleasure?” Megatron asked.

A lump took residence in Ratchet’s intake. “Of course,” he said, careful to keep his tone light despite the ripple of outrage coursing through his spark.

Someday, when things were less fragile and every conversation wasn’t a challenge, Ratchet would sit Megatron down and poke at the origin of all those misconceptions. He would peel back the layers, find the root of the uncertainty, the unease, the agitation. And if it was at all within his ability, he would help Megatron heal.

Someday. Just... not today. They remained fragile and tentative, and Ratchet did not want to stir a nest that was content to be left.

Megatron licked his lips again, and he held the toy back out to Ratchet. "And what if I say the other word?"

Couldn't bring himself to call it a 'safe word,' could he? That was the Decepticon in him.

"Then it's a full stop." Ratchet took Megatron's jaw in hand gently and pressed his forehead to Megatron's. "No games. No winners or losers. Full stop."

The puff of Megatron's ex-vents ghosted over his lips. "Very well. I'll take on this challenge." His thighs pressed inward, against Ratchet's hips. "And I'll be the one victorious."

Ratchet chuckled and let go of Megatron's jaw, but only so he could slide his hand between Megatron's legs and caress the very heated valve at the apex of them.

"We'll see." He circled the seam, felt the rise of charge against his fingertips. "Open up."

A shiver ran through Megatron's field. His panel slid aside, the scent of arousal and lubricant filling the air with delicious tang. Megatron's engine purred a quiet rumble, and his vents hitched as Ratchet circled his rim with careful fingers. Megatron was already wet, and Ratchet couldn't deny it was intoxicating how much Megatron wanted him, wanted this.

Ratchet hummed a laugh. "So ready for me," he murmured and mouthed his way to Megatron's cables, felt Megatron swallow against his lips. "Just what datapad were you reading anyway?"

"Nothing of import," Megatron said, the words a rumble Ratchet could taste. "My thoughts were elsewhere."

"Worried about me?" Ratchet teased.

"Yes."

Shock cut through the building arousal. Ratchet pulled back so he could see Megatron's face. His hand shifted, lubricant-damp fingers resting against Megatron's thigh.

"Don't look so surprised," Megatron said, gruff. "We are in a relationship. And I am fully aware of how the Autobots would view your actions as of late. I have enough guilt on my shoulders without adding your punishment to it."

Ratchet swallowed over a lump in his intake. "I changed my mind." He tossed the vibrator aside, shifting to hold Megatron's hips, slotting himself between Megatron's thighs with growing familiarity. "I want you now."

He rolled his hips, spike surging free, grinding over Megatron's valve in a slick slide of lubricant and heat. He'd save the game for another day. Right now, he wanted to kiss Megatron, touch him, take him as lovers did. Because that was what they were.

"What of our wager?" Megatron asked, but his ventilations hitched, and his fingers curled against Ratchet's sides, tugging him closer.

“Save it for later.” Ratchet found his way to Megatron’s lips, pressed a kiss to the corner of them. It was his turn to be courteous. “May I?” he asked as he rolled forward, spike nudging at Megatron’s valve rim in blatant interest.

Megatron gripped him and tipped backward onto the berth, pulling Ratchet with him in a feat of strength he might not have attempted, had he been under the spell of the fool’s energon. Ratchet grunted, flailing, and it took awkward maneuvering to get them where Ratchet wanted to be: Megatron beneath him, Ratchet notched between his thighs, their lips so close they tasted one another’s ex-vents.

Ratchet had a hand hooked around Megatron’s thigh, the other braced on the berth beside Megatron’s shoulder. Need broiled inside of him, spark pulsing to an uncertain beat.

“Is this my answer?” Ratchet leaned forward, and Megatron curled upward to meet him.

Megatron slid a hand around the back of Ratchet’s head, drew him closer, until they were sharing ventilations. “You damn well know it is,” he growled, and brought their mouths together, glossa stabbing into Ratchet’s mouth as if in claim.

Heat and charge licked down Ratchet’s spinal strut. He groaned into the kiss and rocked forward, slow and deep. Megatron rippled around him, hot and wet, his free hand pulling on Ratchet’s hip, pulling him deeper.

Ratchet sank into him, pouring out the emotional gamut into the kiss. Their clashes were usually ones of fervency, rough around the edges, chasing after pleasure because it was the only thing which made sense. This was different. Slower. Paced.

They kissed like they were trying to memorize the shape of one another’s mouths. He tasted the curve of Megatron’s jaw, the warmth of his intake, before wandering back to Megatron’s lips. He felt every vibration of Megatron’s moans, and their frames rose and fell together like they’d always known the rhythm.

It should have felt awkward.

It didn’t.

Megatron had to be on shift soon. Ratchet couldn’t take the time to lay him out, explore like he wanted. But he could do it in the future. They would have time another day, and Megatron would allow him to do so.

Perhaps with a smirk and a smart-aft comment, but he’d stretch out over the berth, let himself be tied down if Ratchet asked, and he’d moan and arch under Ratchet’s fingertips. He’d look beautiful, those bright red ropes twisted around his armor in complicated patterns. He’d submit like he was sparked for it, and Ratchet would treat that trust with the reverence it deserved.

A surge of arousal ran like fire through Ratchet’s lines. His pace quickened, plunging into Megatron, circling deep, grinding against external nodes and pulling cries of pleasure from Megatron’s intake. Their armor clashed, grating noisily, their fields thoroughly entangled.

Megatron made sounds in his intake, ones that found their way to Ratchet’s array and shot lust down his spinal strut. His engine roared, rattling the berth and Ratchet, and heat blasted from his vents.

“More,” he demanded against Ratchet’s lips, the berth creaking as they rocked together in increasingly urgent motions, lubricant slick between them, Megatron’s spike grinding against Ratchet’s abdomen.

Ratchet panted into the crook of Megatron’s intake, his denta grazing cables. He shifted his grip on Megatron’s thigh, pulling it tighter, changing the angle of his thrusts. Megatron tipped his head back, groaning long and low, his valve spasming around Ratchet’s spike.

“Like that?” Ratchet asked with a low chuckle, his vents coming in short gasps, heat coiling and churning inside of him like a radiator about to burst.

Megatron’s grip on the back of his head slid down to Ratchet’s jaw, jerking his head up to press their lips together. “Don’t have time for you to tease me,” he panted against Ratchet’s mouth.

He clenched and Ratchet groaned, thrusting deep enough to grace Megatron’s ceiling node, charge surging hot through his lines, setting off a rattle in his knees. He breathed a curse, slipping his glossa into Megatron’s mouth, swearing he could taste the need on Megatron’s glossa. It choked the air between them, rode high on their fields.

He pressed his forehead to Megatron’s, thrusting harder and faster, engine roaring, Megatron moving with him like they’d always known this dance. It felt like staking a claim or making a promise, only without words, because words could be twisted while actions and fields shouted the truth.

They were in this together now. That was the choice Ratchet made.

“Get used to it,” Ratchet growled, his lips sloppy against Megatron’s, his field surging over Megatron’s in a tidal wave of need. “You’re mine now.”

By Magnus decree, no less.

A shudder ran across Megatron’s armor, and Ratchet read the lust in it, rather than fear. His fingers tightened on Ratchet’s upper arm. His other hand slapped against Ratchet’s back, keeping him pinned close. His thighs clamped tight, a moan long and low slipping from his intake, and then he was overloading, valve rhythmically rippling around Ratchet’s spike as he spurted hot and wet over Ratchet’s belly.

Ratchet growled, gripped Megatron’s hips, and bore him down into the berth, thrusting hard and fast. Need clawed down his spinal strut, coiled in his belly like a blaze. Megatron’s hands cupped his face, yanked him into a kiss that was more denta than lips. He panted, hot over Ratchet’s lips.

Release whited out Ratchet’s perception for a long, dizzying moment. He sank down into Megatron, pleasure flooding his system in a white-hot crackle of charge. He buried his forehead against Megatron’s chestplate, over the Auto-brand that forever carried the scent of battle.

Silence briefly settled over the tick-tick-tick of cooling frames. But of course, Megatron couldn’t abide by it for long.

His hands swept up and down Ratchet’s back. His engine rumbled with amusement. “I’m yours, am I?”

“Shut up,” Ratchet muttered. He lifted his head, shifting until he sat back on his heels, sliding out of

Megatron in the same motion.

Megatron lay back against the berth, folding his arms behind his head, still splayed beneath Ratchet as though completely at ease despite the transfluid streaking up his belly and the fluids seeping from his valve.

He smirked, optics glimmering with humor. “You’re the one who said it.”

“Heat of the moment,” Ratchet declared. He checked his chronometer. “You’re gonna need a rinse before you take your shift. I suggest you get to it.”

Megatron’s hand boldly slid down his frame, fingers sliding through the slick between his thighs. “And who’s fault is this?”

Ratchet ignored the frisson of heat the sight sent down his backstrut. “Yours, of course.” He slid out from between Megatron’s thighs and off the berth, away from temptation.

“It always is.” Megatron grunted and swung his legs back over the edge, pulling himself off the berth and briefly wobbling on his knees. “You never told me what Rodimus had to say.”

“That’s because Ultra Magnus wanted the honor of telling him.” Ratchet grabbed a mesh cloth and dampened it. “I suppose we’ll find out later.”

“And won’t that be a treat.” Megatron snorted, and paused in the doorway to Ratchet’s small, but private washrack. “Are you going to join me or not?”

Ratchet nibbled on his bottom lip. He probably shouldn’t but...

“Since you’ve made a mess of me, I might as well,” Ratchet said, tossing the damp rag into the recycling basket.

Megatron’s smirk had no busy turning Ratchet’s insides to heated coils. “Whatever helps you recharge,” he said, and vanished into the washrack.

Ratchet cycled a ventilation and swept a hand down his face.

Just what on Cybertron had he gotten himself into?

Something he wasn’t willing to give up apparently.

Ratchet snorted and stepped through the door.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I don’t know if I should congratulate you or offer my sympathies.”

Megatron startled at the unexpected voice, and then cursed himself for not being more aware of his surroundings. He’d been too preoccupied with his own thoughts while soaking in the warm solvent, and not paying enough attention to his passive perception.

Behind him, Ravage chuckled.

Megatron cycled a ventilation and went back to scrubbing his armor clean – paying more attention to the paint streaks this time. Apparently that was what had clued in First Aid, according to Ratchet. It didn’t help that what he and Ratchet had done in the medic’s private rack had not counted as getting clean. Megatron was forced to use the public facilities if he had any hope of showing up for his shift looking respectable.

“Perhaps both,” Megatron replied.

Ravage snorted, but whether he disagreed or agreed, it was hard to say. He sat on his haunches, head tilted, gaze steady. His field was completely unreadable, and he was not on any of Megatron’s sensors. If he hadn’t spoken, Megatron wouldn’t have known he was there.

“Do you disapprove?” Megatron asked as the fall of the solvent helped mask their conversation, but not by much. Luckily, the racks were otherwise deserted, as they often were whenever Megatron saw fit to use them.

“It’s not my place to approve or disapprove,” Ravage replied in an even tone he had to have taught Soundwave, for its lack of inflection.

Megatron glanced over his shoulder. “Yes it is.”

“Well, in that case, you can’t trust him,” Ravage said. His front paws kneaded the ground, talons extending and retracting as though aching to sink into something and cause mayhem.

“Yes, I know. But he can’t trust me either, to be fair.” Megatron flicked off the spray and stood there for a moment, letting the initial rush drip free of his frame.

“Then why are you together?”

Megatron snagged a towel, wiping his face before he turned toward Ravage. “Because there are different kinds of trust.” He rubbed himself dry, wicking away the more obvious bits of moisture.

Silence settled between them. Heavy, but not tense. Ravage looked at him, and Megatron felt the weight of his assessing gaze. He let the silence linger while he methodically cleaned himself before he added, without looking at Ravage,

“I want to be with him,” he said, tone firm without being commanding.

“And you’re sure that’s what he wants, too?”

Megatron bundled the towel in his hands, twisting the fabric. He considered Ratchet’s confession, what Ratchet had done for him with Ultra Magnus.

He tossed the towel into the laundry bin. “Yes.”

Ravage’s head tilted. “Then that’s all that matters.” Something in his posture relaxed, plating unlocked as he dialed down from what was a defensive mode.

Megatron’s lip curled in a half-smile. “You’re not wrong, you know.”

“I rarely am,” Ravage replied, tone amused, mouth curving in a way that suggested a grin.

Megatron laughed, and it felt like a weight lifted from his shoulders, this tension between he and Ravage which had curled into a tight knot between his shoulder blades. He had missed their camaraderie, and had loathed the ache of guilt he’d felt in the interim.

“I need to ask a favor.”

“I’m listening.”

“Can you contact Soundwave and arrange a conversation?”

Ravage’s optics narrowed, head cocking. “Are you..?”

Megatron shook his head in a sharp negative. “No. I just...” He paused and cycled a ventilation, hoping to unknot the twisting coils of tension in his spark. “There are things I need to say. Words I owe him.” He owed Soundwave a great many things. An honest conversation was only the beginning.

“It can be done.” Ravage stood, padding without sound toward Megatron, only to pass him by and flick him with the stub of his tail. “Of all the sparklings I helped raise, I think you’re the most troublesome.”

It was Megatron’s turn to snort. “I hardly count as a sparkling.”

“In comparison to me, you definitely do. You and Soundwave both.” Ravage’s field flicked out, ripe with amusement and something that tasted of approval. “I’ll make contact and let you know.”

“I appreciate it.” Megatron moved past the mirror, giving himself a cursory glance. There were no obvious red or white streaks in his paint. Not on his thighs, his shoulders, his – he twisted to check – his back. All was clear. “Now I have to be on shift shortly. You know where to find me.”

“In Ratchet’s berth, yes, I know.”

Megatron rolled his optics. “I’m not always there.”

“More often than not, as of late.” Ravage stepped past him, toward the exit, tail twitching. “This is not me judging, by the way. Just making an observation.”

The door opened ahead of them.

The corridor wasn't empty. Megatron's co-captain stood in wait, leaning against the wall opposite the door, his arms folded over his chassis. He had one ankle crossed over the other, in a pose that was probably meant to be nonchalant, but didn't quite manage it.

Ravage slunk down the hallway, leaving Megatron alone with his co-captain. Blue optics slid his direction as Rodimus pushed off the wall.

"Did you think I wasn't coming to relieve you?" Megatron asked with a raised orbital ridge.

"No. I just didn't think you wanted to have this conversation on the bridge."

Megatron's fairly good mood plummeted. He frowned. "And what conversation would that be?"

For once, Rodimus appeared serious and not so much his playful self. "The one where we talk about the fact you're fragging my CMO, and he made the mistake of telling you about the fool's energon."

"Ah." Megatron crossed his arms, standing firm. "I don't think it's any of your business whose berth I warm. You're talking about the interfacing choices between two consenting mechs."

Rodimus' optics narrowed.

"Not to mention the fact Ratchet is no longer your CMO," Megatron continued, because he could, and he felt Rodimus ought to remember that little detail about one of his crewmembers. "Technically, that position is First Aid's."

Rodimus audibly cycled a ventilation and rolled his optics. "I knew that, and don't sidestep my point."

"You've yet to make one." Megatron shifted his weight. "Are you warning me? Threatening me?"

Rodimus squared his jaw. "Both." He jabbed a finger toward Megatron's chestplate, right below his badge. "Ratchet can make his own choices, so I'm not about that. What I am about is how much you better be genuine with him. He put a lot of faith in you. Don't repay it by being... well, you."

It was almost sweet, his concern for Ratchet. Megatron could tell it was genuine. Rodimus' field was all but shouting at him, and he bristled with protective anger. He wasn't particularly close to Ratchet, Megatron knew this much. So was it a generic protectiveness for his crew? Or distaste for Megatron in general?

Perhaps it was both.

"Again, it's none of your business," Megatron repeated, but the anger he expected to burst inside of him did not come. "But I'm sure Ratchet will appreciate you speaking on his behalf."

Rodimus scowled. "You can't threaten me with his temper."

"Is that what I was doing?" Megatron's lips twitched to conceal the smile wanting to break out.

Rodimus' jaw twisted, optics narrowing like he wanted to show his pique, and held back at the last moment. "This isn't a game, Megatron."

Megatron hardened his gaze. "I never claimed it was. I certainly don't think it is, and neither does Ratchet." He gnawed on the inside of his cheek. "Our relationship is our business. As for the fool's energon, that is my burden to bear."

"Until you realize how strong you actually are and decide it's time to stop pretending you're an Autobot," Rodimus retorted. His hands pulled into fists at his side.

"After this long, you still think I'm pretending?"

Rodimus tapped his chestplate again, and he was damn lucky Megatron was trying to be better, because his old self would have decked the other mech already. "I think you've been a Decepticon for a long, long time. And as much as I want to believe in Optimus' little experiment, my crew needs me to be cautious. So that's what I'm going to be."

"Trust but verify," Megatron said. "How prudent of you." He stepped back, out of Rodimus' reach, readying himself in case Rodimus tried touching him again. "If only you displayed such intelligence more often."

Anger flashed in Rodimus' optics. His lips formed a thin line, and then he stepped back as well, furthering the distance between them. His vents whooshed in a hard burst, and he looked like he might consider saying something else. But then he spun on a heel and stomped away, spoiler flick-flicking in gestures reminiscent of Starscream.

Megatron didn't think either of them came away the victor in that conversation.

He sighed and headed to the bridge.

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His shift was quiet, if not uneventful. There was a dull haze lingering around the ship right now. Their hope of finding the Knights of Cybertron had been dashed on the jagged rocks of a horror show. They hadn't found answers, just more questions. They'd turned around, heading back the way they came, but it would take an equal amount of weeks to retrace their steps.

Megatron spent the ship reviewing the data they'd pulled from the computers at Clandestine. It was simultaneously a relief and a disappointment to learn their ancestors, whatever offshoot of the Knights they'd been, were capable of equal amounts of horror and death as they were now.

For all that the Lost Light was searching for the Knights for answers, Megatron was starting to believe that they'd find no salvation in the ancient mechs.

Or maybe the search wasn't about finding the Knights at all.

Midway through his shift, the bridge staff changed, staggered as always to ensure there was no moment without proper coverage. Megatron noted it absently, trusting the crew to change over without issue.

A presence in his periphery, however, attracted his attention. He marked his place in the report and

looked up to find Bluestreak within speaking distance, giving him a curious look. The sniper's threat lingered at the back of his mind, and Megatron had taken it seriously.

"Yes?"

Bluestreak moved a step closer, head tilted. "I'm trying to decide if I should congratulate you or wish you luck."

"You're the second person to say that to me today," Megatron said. "Is there something about Ratchet I should know?"

Bluestreak folded his arms over his chassis. "There are a lot of things, but it's not my place to tell you. It's his." He looked over Megatron's shoulder, staring into the distance. "I still don't trust you. But I'm beginning to." His gaze wandered back. "Don't frag that up."

He should not feel as threatened as he did.

"Noted," Megatron said.

"Good." Bluestreak paused before he offered a hand to Megatron, his posture relaxing and his tone shifting to something more congenial. "If you need some information, let me know. I may not trust you, but what you and Ratchet are doing requires trust, and you still deserve proper knowledge and care."

Megatron cycled his optics. "I... might take you up on that," he said as he clasped Bluestreak's hand for a firm, companionable shake. "Resources around here aren't--"

"They're slag, I know," Bluestreak cut in, blunt but with a cheerful edge. He chuckled and withdrew. "You know how to find me, sir. If you want something a bit more informative."

"I do. Thank you."

Bluestreak nodded and slipped away, switching with Blaster on comms and letting the communications specialist take a much needed break.

Megatron couldn't decide if he'd just made a mortal enemy or a tentative friend.

Autobots were strange.

The rest of his shift passed without incident.

Megatron made notations in the datapad throughout the report and put together something to send back to Cybertron to warn other potential spacegoers. He started a plan of action for future encounters with the estrix, planning on sending it to Ultra Magnus before he finalized it. He valued the other mech's input.

Megatron paused.

He cc'ed Rodimus as well. He was, technically, the co-captain, and even though he vanished when there was important paperwork to be done, he seemed to take the safety of his crew seriously. Maybe, for once, he'd actually read this report.

He'd just clicked send when Ultra Magnus walked onto the bridge, early for his shift, per the usual. He didn't like to be rushed when it came to the transfer of command.

Megatron saved his work, closed out his datapad, and tucked it into subspace. "You drew the short stick this evening, I see," he said by way of greeting.

Ultra Magnus cocked his head. "I'm sensing that's a turn of phrase that I'm not familiar with, but if you're referring to having the late shift, then yes, I fear I did, ah, draw the short stick."

"I'd apologize but something tells me you don't mind."

"I don't, in fact. It's quieter." Ultra Magnus' lips twitched in the closest thing he had to a smile.

"That's good to know, for future reference." Megatron slid away from the command console and let Ultra Magnus take his place. "There's nothing to report. All's quiet."

Ultra Magnus nodded slowly as he logged into the system, registering himself as in-command. "Also good to know." He paused and gave Megatron a sidelong look. "I had a discussion with Ratchet earlier today."

Megatron didn't tense, but it was a near thing. "So I was told." He crossed his arms. "Is this something we need to have an official conversation about later?"

"No. Ratchet covered the pertinent points. As everything is consensual, the only one in a place for discipline is Ratchet," Ultra Magnus answered in a steady tone, but his attention was focused on the console. Something in his posture suggested unease.

"I see." Megatron inclined his head. "And do you have an opinion you wish to share?"

Ultra Magnus' fingers swept over the console screen before he half-turned to face Megatron. "I have an opinion, but other than the potential ramifications regarding the chain of command, I don't think your relationship is any of my business."

Megatron chuckled quietly, trying not to gather the attention of the crew on the bridge. "I appreciate your discretion."

"Mm." Ultra Magnus turned back toward the console. "For what it's worth, you are good for each other," he added, so quiet Megatron almost didn't catch it.

"Thank you." A genuine flush of gratitude struck Megatron's spark. For all that he expected Ultra Magnus to be one of his most vocal detractors, he'd quickly learned to appreciate the second in command's professionalism.

What little Megatron could sense of Ultra Magnus' field, there was a hint of embarrassment in it.

"Have a good shift, Magnus."

"Enjoy your evening, Megatron."

Megatron left before the moment could drag on any longer.

He found himself heading toward Ratchet's suite without thinking about it. Ravage's words lingered

at the back of his mind, and Megatron almost changed course. But what did it matter if he spent more time in the medic's berth?

He checked for Ratchet's location and slipped down an adjacent corridor. Ratchet wasn't off-shift yet, but he would be soon. They'd not gotten to the point of exchanging room codes yet. Another discussion to have.

Megatron walked through the front doors of the medbay, which gave a little ding of announcement as he entered. No one was immediately in sight, but Medibot came trundling down the main hallway, beeping a triple tone of greeting.

"I'm fine," Megatron answered, lifting a palm to the drone. "You don't need to summon anyone for my care."

Nevertheless, a scan washed over his frame. Megatron sighed and waited for Medibot to complete its assessment. He knew what the result would be before Medibot finished, and sighed again as a flurry of sounds and lights erupted over Medibot's frame.

Megatron palmed his face. "Please don't send out an--"

Lights flashed in the lobby. Another, louder chirp started to echo from the rarely-staffed desk.

--alarm," Megatron finished. His shoulders sank. Yes, he knew he was quite literally falling apart on the inside. He didn't need Medibot to inform him of such.

He might be co-captain of the ship, but he did not have the authority to deactivate Medibot's call for emergency services. He could only wait for someone to do so.

"Alright, what stupid thing did you do now...?" First Aid emerged from the main hallway, wiping his hands with a mesh cloth, a streak of some kind of fluid painted across his chest. He caught sight of Megatron, and his shoulder tires swun with irritation. "You're not injured."

"Medibot seems to think I am," Megatron said.

First Aid vented noisily, walked up behind the drone, and plucked an override into a panel. The shrill alarms ceased, Megatron's audials rang, and Medibot honked. It spun around, back down the hallway, in a huff if Megatron had to guess.

"One of these days I'll update his programming where it concerns you." First Aid watched the drone retreat deeper into the medbay. His gaze shifted back to Megatron. "I guess you're looking for Ratchet, since you can drink regular energon now."

Was there anyone on the ship who didn't know of their relationship now?

"I am."

First Aid swept the cloth over his chest, wiping away whatever fluid splattered his armor. "He's in his office with Rung."

"His office?" Megatron echoed, arching an orbital ridge.

"Yes, we're still working on that." Humor edged into First Aid's tone. His visor brightened. "You

know how it is. Once you start something, it's hard to let go."

Megatron snorted and gave First Aid a sidelong look. "Is it your turn to threaten me?"

First Aid shrugged and tucked the dirtied mesh cloth into an arm compartment. "I think you've probably been warned off by enough mechs. At this point, you already know what'll happen if you hurt him." He dusted off his hands and peered up at Megatron. "He's a grumpy old pain in the aft, but we still love him. And I think you're starting to figure out why."

Words wouldn't come.

Damn, but Megatron hated medics. Why did they have to be so insightful?

"He is a force of nature," Megatron admitted.

First Aid snorted. "That's one way of putting it." He gestured over his shoulder. "You can go on back there. They aren't doing anything that can't be interrupted. I already asked."

Megatron moved to pass First Aid, but he hesitated, searching the mech's visor for a clear answer to his friendliness. "You don't seem opposed."

First Aid slipped past, and Megatron followed him with his optics as he moved to sit behind the unused receptionist desk. "I think if you're faking it, the truth will out sooner or later. But for now, you and Ratchet seem to be good for each other, and it's the kind of thing that makes for a peaceful afternoon for me." He ducked behind the desk, rummaging the contents of a cabinet. "That's all I need to know."

Fair point. And something to contemplate later.

Megatron left First Aid to his business, and made his way to Ratchet's office, passing by Medibot's recharge station, where the tiny drone was plugged in and charging, lights twinkling across the small frame.

The door to Ratchet/First Aid/the Chief Medical Officer's office was open and voices drifted out, though Megatron couldn't make out the words. He rapped his knuckles on the edge of the frame as he popped his head into view. He immediately spied Ratchet behind his desk, and Rung sitting in front of him. They both looked up as he knocked, Rung with a warm smile.

"I think that's my cue to leave," Rung said as he pushed himself out of the chair. His plating fluttered around his frame in a gesture Megatron had learned to recognize meant he was pleased.

Ratchet scowled. "I'm not going to frag him over the desk. You can stay if you want."

"Now, now, don't disappoint him like that Ratchet," Rung said, clicking his glossa. He turned and flashed Megatron a soft smile.

Ratchet's face colored.

Megatron had to fight off a grin, because he had to admit, it was hilarious to watch Ratchet get flustered, because it didn't happen often.

"He did not come here for a... a tryst!" Ratchet spluttered.

Megatron leaned against the door frame, folding his arms. "Now, why are you so sure about that?"

Rung chuckled.

Ratchet glared and pointed a finger at him. "Don't you encourage him, Megatron. He doesn't need it."

"If anyone needs the encouraging, it's you," Rung replied with a wink Megatron's direction. "Stubborn old mech, isn't he?"

Megatron huffed a laugh. "Bit rusty, too."

Ratchet's glare darkened into a scowl. He looked half a second from blowing his top, and all he could manage was a splutter of words.

Rung didn't seem the least bit phased. He patted Megatron on the upper arm as he passed. "Congratulations, Megatron."

Somehow, Megatron thought he meant more than his newfound relationship with Ratchet.

He tipped his head in acknowledgment.

"Just go!" Ratchet hissed.

Rung chuckled and slipped out the door without a backward look. If anything, he had a jaunty step about him, and a sense of delight glimmered in his field.

Autobots were just fragging weird.

Megatron twisted his jaw and directed his attention to Ratchet. The medic cycled a long, steady ventilation, as if gathering his patience around him like a mantle. Only then did he lift his gaze to Megatron, immediately following it up with a frown.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm surprised you can tell." Megatron pushed off the edge of the frame and stepped into the office, triggering the door to close behind him.

Ratchet frowned and rose from the desk, moving around it. "I've been making it my business to know. It's part of being a decent Dom."

"Ah." Megatron leaned against the wall, not trusting his bulk to those delicate chairs. "Nothing is wrong. I've just finished running the gauntlet of everyone who wants to protect you."

Ratchet scowled. "Those idiots," he muttered, gaze shifting away for a moment, color staying in his cheeks. "Well, if it makes you feel better, you have at least two mechs willing to give me the shovel talk on your behalf."

"Two?" Megatron cycled his optics. He could only think of one mech who would conceivably threaten Ratchet, and he wasn't certain Ravage approved enough to bother.

“Your pet cat, for one.” Ratchet leaned against the desk, hands braced along the edge. “And Rung.”

Megatron startled. “Rung?”

“Yeah. That’s why he was here.” Ratchet shrugged, but it was far from nonchalant. His frame language was visibly tense. “He wanted to remind me of the enormous responsibility I’m accepting by bringing those dynamics into our relationship. As if I didn’t know.” He scowled, but there wasn’t much heat about it.

Megatron’s spark warmed. He wasn’t sure why Rung would speak on his behalf, but he appreciated it nonetheless. It made him feel less separate from the crew of the Lost Light.

“Don’t. Don’t do that.”

Megatron’s lips curved, fighting off a smile. “Don’t do what?” he asked innocently.

“Don’t look so smug.” Ratchet pushed off the desk and stalked toward him, not with menace but with intent. If it weren’t for the coil of heat winding through his field, Megatron might have been concerned. “You’re not usurping my crew just yet.”

Megatron barked a laugh and lowered his arms, slipping them around Ratchet as the medic came within reach. “They’re your crew are they now? How many captains does this ship have?”

“Still not enough.” Ratchet gripped his hips, fingers sliding into Megatron’s seams. “This ship is a madhouse, and we’re all the afflicted.”

Megatron snorted. “That’s a little melodramatic, don’t you think?”

Ratchet hummed a noncommittal noise and looked up at Megatron. “You’re too damn tall,” he grumbled.

“You could tell me what you want instead.” Megatron’s engine rumbled a quiet purr. The air thickened with anticipation, and Ratchet’s field stroked over his with intent.

“Since when have I ever taken the easy way out?” Ratchet asked. He looked up, glossa flicking over his lips, his field pressing in on Megatron, ripe with heat and want.

“And they say I’m stubborn,” Megatron sighed.

He slid his hands to Ratchet’s face, cupped him gently, and brought their mouths together in a soft, warm kiss. Ratchet relented, lips parting to welcome his glossa, his hands tightening on Megatron’s seams. Need pulsed a steady beat in his field.

“Are you going to bend me over your desk after all?” Megatron asked against Ratchet’s lips, his hands sweeping down to trace a delicate path over Ratchet’s intake cables.

Exasperation spiked in Ratchet’s field. “I’m going to maim, Rung.”

Megatron chuckled and pressed a kiss to the corner of Ratchet’s mouth. “Your habsuite then?”

“Yes, my fragging habsuite. I’m not an exhibitionist.” Ratchet’s tone was sharp, but there was humor in the harmonics of it.

Megatron swallowed his irritation with a kiss, and then another one, because that was what people in relationships did. They were soft, and they were playful, and they teased each other, and they trusted one another.

They shared habsuites and came to each other's workplaces and made friends with their friends and talked about things.

He and Ratchet still needed to work on the latter.

Progress, however, was being made.

Together.

Megatron had to admit, it had a nice ring.

*

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end, folks. Thanks so much to everyone who's offered kudos and comments and bookmarked this fic, I'm so glad you enjoyed it!

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